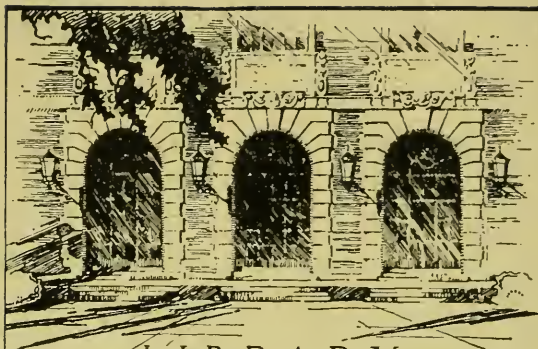




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CHARLIE.

A WAIF'S HISTORY,

TOLD BY HIMSELF.

BY

MRS. WOODWARD,

AUTHOR OF

"MERTONSVILLE PARK," "EDITH VIVIAN'S EXPERIENCE OF THE
WORLD," "WILL SHE BE HAPPY?" "ELLEN CLINTON,"

"MR. FAVERSHAM'S NEW YEAR'S GUEST,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

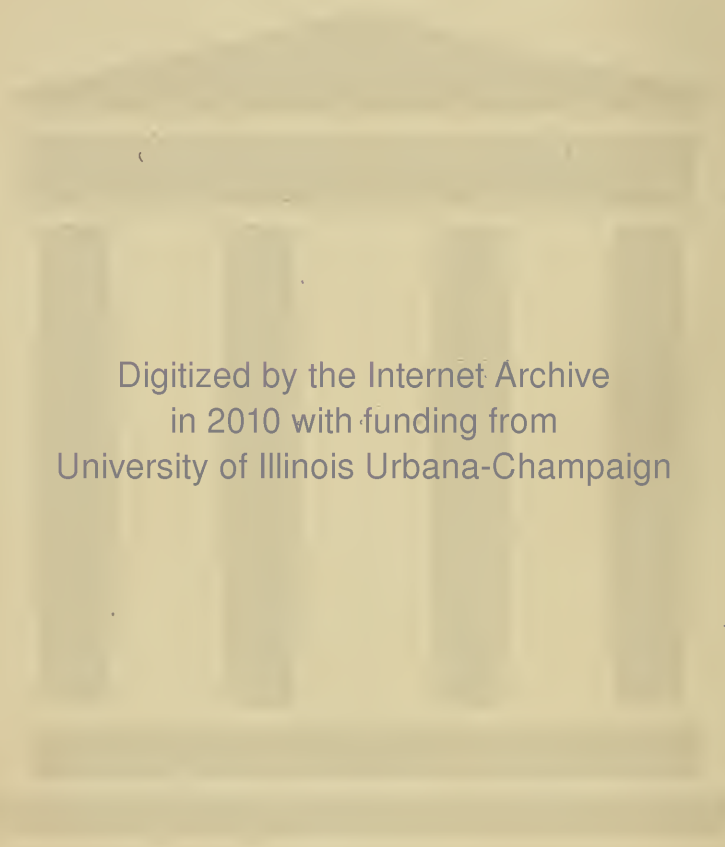


London:

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CHARLIE.



CHAPTER I.

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

“’Tis past : the great struggle is o’er,
The war of my bosom subsides ;
And passion’s strong current no more
Impels its impetuous tide.”

“But oh, the folly of distracted men
Who griefs in earnest, joys in jest pursue !”

IN course of time I received answers to both the letters I had written.

The vicar’s arrived first, and contained the very decidedly expressed opinion that it was only right and proper for me to wish to have

the mystery of my birth cleared up ; and that during my absence from England he should consider himself authorised to act for me, and intended therefore to lose no time in laying the matter before his legal adviser, and asking his advice as to the steps which it would be advisable to take by way of obtaining the information I so earnestly desired, and setting my mind at rest on a question of such serious importance to myself.

Mr. Whitworth, on the contrary, strongly urged me to allow the matter to drop. I had no real evidence, he said, to show that this stranger was in any way personally connected with me ; and the mere fact of the two rings being the same was not sufficient of itself to identify him as having been actually acquainted with my mother ; while as to the emotion he had betrayed at the sight of my own features, and the subsequent interest he manifested in learning my history, it might be accounted for in more ways than one, and was no positive proof that if wrong had been done *he* must necessarily have been a party to it.

Altogether, it struck me that this reasoning was very weak and illogical ; the whole argument being nothing more or less than a sort of begging the question, quite different to anything which I should have expected from so clear-headed and intellectually minded a man as Mr. Whitworth ; and I smiled rather sadly as I laid down the long and closely written epistle, feeling in spite of myself somewhat chilled and disappointed.

One thing I particularly noticed : he made no allusion whatever to that part of my letter in which I had begged him to let me know whether he recognised in my description of the gentleman I had met a former friend or acquaintance of his own ; and I naturally concluded from his silence that he *had* done so, although he did not wish, for some reason or other, to acknowledge it.

After this came rather a long interval, during which I heard no more on the subject.

Subsequently I discovered that several of the vicar's letters had failed to reach me, in consequence of our rapid march from one

place to another, Mr. Stafford having become more restless and erratic in his mode of conducting himself since our arrival in India, and no sooner were we comfortably settled in one place, and I had written, with his full concurrence—often by his express wish—to announce the fact to our absent friends, than a sudden freak would take him, and a few days afterwards find us transported hundreds of miles away, thus rendering it almost an impossibility for me to attempt to introduce anything like order or method into our arrangements—postal or otherwise—and the only wonder was that we either of us ever received a letter at all!

When I did at length hear from Mr. Vaughan, it was to the effect that all his efforts to discover my incognito had been in vain; and that, so far from his having obtained any assistance from Mr. Whitworth, the latter had steadily declined to co-operate with him in his plans, and hinted on several occasions that it would, in his opinion, be far wiser to give up all hope or expectation of ever succeeding in obtaining any

more information than we at present possessed.

And, as time passed on, the vicar seemed to recognise the expediency of following his advice ; “for,” as he very sensibly observed in one of the few letters which happened by some fortunate chance to reach me, “what was the use of prosecuting a search which seemed fated to result in nothing but disappointment and defeat—trying, as it were, to clear up a mystery which would probably never *be* cleared up, especially after all these years of silence ? It was utterly hopeless ! one of those strangely incomprehensible affairs which, the more one seeks to understand, the more baffling do they become.”

In answer to this, I wrote to say that I quite agreed with him in thinking that it would be advisable, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, for me to give up all idea of ever seeking to discover a secret which had up to the present time remained concealed, and was, so far as we could judge, unfathomable.

For some time past, indeed, I had been

very much exercised in my mind on this self-same subject ; and it was rather a relief to me than otherwise when my kind friend's zeal thus began to cool, and I was able, without the fear of giving him offence, or laying myself open to the charge of ingratitude, to allude to the change which had gradually been taking place within me.

I scarcely comprehended it myself, but I somehow felt, during this period of enforced suspense, as if a sort of revolution was going on in my heart. Dimly at first, but growing more and more distinct as the days and weeks passed on, came the consciousness that it was my duty to let the dead past bury its dead ; to resign myself to the inevitable, and accept the place and position which Providence had doubtless marked out for me ; and, instead of morbidly musing over what might have been, and speculating upon my real or fancied wrongs, to go quietly and conscientiously forward, cheerfully resigning my own will, and mistrusting my own wisdom, being ready to submit to anything and everything which my Heavenly Father might

ordain, persuaded that, however difficult the path, however painful the discipline, however opposed to sight and sense, and present ease and comfort, all was and must be well !

Ah ! it is a great thing when we can arrive at this conclusion, confessing from our very hearts that all *is* well, even though our brightest prospects seem clouded, our fairest visions disappear, and the hopes we have been fondly cherishing, perhaps for years, are blasted and crushed before the stern realities of an unlooked-for reverse of fortune.

I found it so in my experience ; and so, my reader, will you also, if you will only, when doubt and difficulty and tribulation draw near, look away from your own deceptive feelings, forget your apparently unrealised anticipations, withered gourds and dried-up fountains of earthly comfort, and believe that the ever-faithful One is guiding the helm, and conducting you, imperceptibly it may be, but surely and safely, into the haven where you would be.

When once I had settled this matter with myself, and could honestly and sincerely say,

"Thy will, not mine, O Lord," I felt a degree of happiness which I was far from experiencing before. The agitation and unrest which I had been vaguely conscious of while taking such eager pains to ascertain what my proper name was, and to whom I rightfully belonged, gave place to a calm serenity such as almost astonished myself, and even made Mr. Stafford regard me with surprise.

"I declare you are looking positively radiant," he observed, the day after I had sent off the letter containing my changed sentiments to Mr. Vaughan. "I can't make it out! There's no fresh news, is there?" And he eyed me curiously.

"No; there's nothing particular going on, that I am aware of," I answered, with a smile, the secret of which he could scarcely be expected to understand.

"Then what on earth has come over you?" he demanded, with an air of interest. "To look at you, I should imagine you had come suddenly in for that fortune which I am always predicting for you."

“I have got something better than that,” I replied, thoughtfully.

“Have you, really?” was his sceptical rejoinder. “And what, pray, may that something better consist of?”

“Peace!” I rejoined, in a low, earnest tone. He had known all about my former wishes and anxieties, and I felt that it was only due to him to let him into the secret of my present intentions. “I have given up all idea of seeking to find out who I am, and am going to be content with my present ambiguous position.”

“That’s very odd,” he remarked, with an air of astonishment. “I thought you were wild to have the matter of your parentage settled?”

“So I was,” I promptly assented. “I am quite ashamed, indeed, when I think of all my restlessness and discontent; but now, thank God! my eyes have been opened to the folly and ingratitude of seeking to discover a secret which is so evidently hid from me, and for the future I shall be content to go on in my ignorance, without making any

further attempt to have the mystery revealed."

"Ah, well! I dare say you are right," dubiously responded Mr. Stafford, looking, however, anything but enlightened. "It's certainly a very unsatisfactory business, doing things through the medium of others. When we next go to England, you will be able to look after your own affairs."

"For the future I shall let matters take their course," I quickly informed him. "If it is God's will that I should ever be made acquainted with that which I want to know, He will find a way of telling me all about it, without any interference on my own part or that of any one else; so that I shall never again attempt even to make the slightest inquiry on the subject."

"Well, as I have often told you before, I cannot for a moment pretend to follow you when you come to this kind of high-flown sentiment," was the somewhat slighting response; and my companion smiled rather superciliously, and shrugged his shoulders with an expression which seemed to imply

that he considered I was talking great nonsense. "Anything in the shape of practical common-sense I can understand as well as most men, but when you once begin to launch forth into this kind of far-fetched reasoning, I confess I am completely bewildered."

"You will understand one day," I said, rather wistfully.

I think my faith just then must have been stronger than usual, for I spoke in all sincerity, although there was certainly nothing in his present mode of going on to encourage me to hope that the time was drawing near when my anxieties on his behalf would be set at rest, and he would be able at last to shake off his evil habits, and spend the remnant of his hitherto wasted life in another and more profitable manner.

So far, indeed, from seeing any ground of encouragement, I could not disguise from myself the melancholy fact, that, however desirous I might be to look upon the best side of things, and give him full credit for even the slightest act of self-denial or restraint, he was on the whole as far, apparently, from

repentance or reformation as ever ; and often, during our lengthened tour in India, I became at times so depressed and disheartened at my manifest lack of success, that had it not been for the remembrance of the anxious father who trusted me so implicitly, and looked forward eventually to my being the means of influencing him for good, I must positively have given up in despair.

As it was, I was often tempted very strongly to relinquish a position which seemed every day to grow more and more hateful and unbearable ; and once—ah ! shall I ever forget that terrible time, when my poor unfortunate friend and companion lay at the point of death, battling with the same horrible disease which had on more than one previous occasion threatened to extinguish the feeble spark of life within him ?—I felt the responsibility which rested with me so keenly, that I was almost at my wit's end.

We had been two years in India before this occurred, however, and I was looking forward with more pleasure than I can express to another visit to England, when

our plans were suddenly frustrated by the unexpected arrival, at the very place where we had temporarily taken up our own quarters, of a boisterous set of young fellows—old acquaintances of Mr. Stafford's—who were planning an expedition to the Himalaya Mountains, and unfortunately insisted on our accompanying them.

It was quite in vain that I privately protested against this arrangement, and earnestly besought my weak-minded companion to decline the—to him—tempting proposal. Quite in vain that I reminded him of the various risks he would run were he to join so wild and reckless a party ; and the probable result, so far as his own mental and bodily well-being was concerned. It was utterly useless ! Go he would, and did ; and from henceforth my own path became more tangled and difficult than ever, while his moral laxity—exposed as he was to the baleful influences of these most undesirous associates—began perceptibly to increase.

It was, of course, quite out of the question for me to expect that one man's unaided

efforts could possibly succeed in accomplishing much, when several were conjointly working in an opposite direction ; nevertheless, I am thankful to remember that I did not shrink during this painful crisis from openly expressing my disapproval of that which seemed to me deserving of condemnation ; and on some few occasions I actually contrived, almost as much to my own surprise as that of the others, in carrying my point, and saving my poor infatuated friend, in spite of himself, from certain proceedings of a more than usually pronounced and unequivocal nature, in which he was preparing to take a part.

At last serious news reached us. Sir Stafford Stafford lay dangerously ill ; and, at his special request, his son was conjured to lose no time in returning to England.

But this, alas ! was precisely what he could not do ; for the very day which brought him this melancholy intelligence, he was stricken down with the terrible attack which I have already alluded to ; and before twenty-

four hours had elapsed, he was in the ravings of delirium.

Then began that fearful struggle between life and death. For a whole month he was in danger of going off at any moment. The doctor came and went, and at every succeeding visit he seemed, I thought, to take a graver and more gloomy view of the case.

From the very first, indeed, he never hinted that there was more than a bare possibility of the poor fellow's recovery; and the few general expressions of encouragement and sympathy which he gave utterance to from time to time, were rather intended to reconcile and prepare me for what was coming than anything else.

My own position at this critical time was a peculiarly painful and distressing one. Except for Mr. Stafford's valet—a timid, irresolute man, who in an emergency like the present was of very little practical assistance—I was absolutely alone, our late travelling companions having speedily deserted us on discovering the serious nature

of the illness which they had themselves greatly assisted to bring about.

Night after night I kept my solitary vigil beside him, not daring to close my eyes for a single moment, lest nature should prove too strong for me, and I might fall asleep in spite of myself; and oh! it was such a pitiable sight to see the poor fellow lying thus, helpless and unconscious; young, and handsome, and wealthy; and yet held fast in this deadly and loathsome grasp; to watch his fitful struggles to escape from the coils which his own unbridled passions had woven around him; his impotent and spasmodic efforts to free himself from the frightful delusions which emanated from the poor disordered brain, and shake off the pall-like darkness which surrounded him on all sides, enveloping both mind and body like a dense impenetrable cloud, which shuts out everything but gloom, and wretchedness, and madness, and despair.

And while he lay thus, haunted by a thousand delirious fancies, and giving way to occasional wild ravings such as showed

that he had not the most remote idea where he was, or by whom tended, his far differently situated father was peacefully breathing his last in his quiet Lincolnshire home, happily unconscious of this fresh and danger-fraught crisis in his unfortunate son's history.

CHAPTER II.

ONE TAKEN AND ANOTHER LEFT.

“Thou faileth not ! above wants, cares, and sighing,
A Father’s love divine, all need supplying,
Us guideth still upon our homeward road,
That faileth not.”

“Thou faileth not ! ’bove havoc, wand’ring, straying,
A Shepherd’s eye, once closed in death, surveying,
Restores, and comforts still, with staff and rod,
That faileth not.”

“And there are lines not always faded,
Which speak a mind not all degraded,
Even by the crimes through which it waded.”

I do not believe I ever prayed so earnestly
for any one in my life, as I did for poor
Edmund Stafford, that he might be spared

to repent of his wickedness, and amend his ways.

It seemed so terrible to think of his being cut off just then in the very midst of his sins; to be sent drifting, as it were, away into the darkness, without a single ray of comfort or consolation, without knowing even whither he was going, or being conscious that he was going at all! The very idea made me shudder and turn pale, and urged me on to redouble my own feeble efforts to see that the doctor's orders were faithfully carried out, and no means left untried which might tend ever so remotely to conduce to his ultimate recovery.

Still it all seemed labour lost; no change for the better appeared in his symptoms; no perceptible improvement could be discerned in his condition; and the state of semi-stupor which at length took the place of his previous wild and incoherent ravings, so far from being a hopeful sign, was, the doctor informed me, rather indicative he feared that the end was drawing near, so utterly weakened and prostrated had he become, with no apparent

power of rallying, no capability of shaking off an attack which had already lasted far longer than his previous ones, and was marked, moreover, by the gravest and most discouraging features, which rendered the case in consequence a very critical and complicated one.

One memorable night—how vividly even yet I can recall the scene!—I prepared to keep my lonely watch, with the doctor's significant words ringing in my ears :

“You must not be astonished if he should pass away without any return to consciousness, as it not unfrequently happens that this sort of stupor terminates in death.”

Was it indeed so? I sadly asked myself, as I fixed my eyes with mournful wistfulness upon the still white face; should I never again receive from him a single glance of recognition, or hear him utter one sensible or coherent word? Oh! it was very hard to realise! very dark and mysterious! Altogether I felt just then as if I was passing through a sort of hideous nightmare: a dreadful terror oppressed me, strangely mingled

with an infinite pity, a deep and intense yearning after the soul of this poor unconscious self-destroyer; and at last the whirl of contradictory emotions became so great and unendurable, that I gave utterance to an irrepressible groan, and sinking on my knees, tried to calm and tranquillise my perturbed and restless spirit by holding a brief period of communion with One who is at all times touched with the feeling of our infirmities, and ever ready to hold out a comforting and sustaining hand when He sees our faith waver and our spirits fail.

And *what* a privilege it is to be thus able, at any moment, to take advantage of the sure word of promise, and cast our cares, be they many or few, great or small, relating to our own affairs or those of others, upon *Him*, the gracious burden-bearer, the brother born for adversity, and feel and know, not as a vague, far-away possibility, a doubtful problem which has never yet been solved, but a sure and certain reality that He does hear, and save, and help! That coming to Him weak, He makes us strong; empty.

He fills us with His own peace ; sorrowful and in tears, He sends us away with a smile upon our lips and a song in our hearts.

Ah, yes, dear reader, it is well worth trying the experiment sometimes, just as I did that night, when half distracted with grief, and temptation, and doubt, and despair I cast myself at His feet, and tried to show Him all that was in my heart.

And presently the darkness disappeared, the mental chaos subsided, and with a sort of new-born hopefulness I suddenly remembered the oft-repeated saying : ‘ Man’s extremity is God’s opportunity,’ and proceeded forthwith to plead with trembling earnestness for my poor friend’s life.

Almost without being aware of the fact, I spoke aloud—forgetting in the excitement of the moment that I was not alone—but I could never afterwards recollect the words I used, neither could I tell how long I remained absorbed in this solemn exercise.

I think, however, it must have been a considerable time, judging from the feeling of faintness and exhaustion which came over

me when I at length rose from my knees, and mechanically took possession of my old seat near the bed, without once glancing towards its motionless occupant.

Scarcely had I seated myself when I started up again in the wildest amazement ; all my weakness and prostration lost sight of in the exquisite thrill of pleasure which agitated my frame, on hearing a low but perfectly distinct voice pronounce my name ! And, as I eagerly bent over the wasted form, I met poor Edmund's eyes fixed full upon me, while a glimmering smile flickered over the pale face, and he feebly put out his hand, as if with the intention of grasping one of mine, and murmured, quite consciously :

“ You dear old fellow ! ”

“ Hush ! ” I said, scarcely able to restrain my emotion, and yet realising most intensely the danger of saying or doing anything to agitate or excite him ; “ you must not attempt to talk yet. Just drink this,” and I brought forward a cup containing some nourishing decoction which had been recommended by the doctor ; “ it will do you good.”

I put it to his lips as I spoke, and without another word he obeyed me, and a few minutes later he had fallen into a deep sleep, from which he did not awaken until the morning was far advanced.

“Can this be the beginning of the end?” I mused, a sudden reaction from hope to fear coming across me as I watched this lengthened slumber, and remembered what Dr. Elmslie had said about the probability of his passing signlessly away.

But no! the breathing became regular and natural, and by degrees the poor wan face assumed a less statuesque and deathlike expression, so that I gradually shook off my misgivings, and maintained my watchful post at his side, ready to respond to any further gleam of consciousness on his part, and administer a fresh supply of nourishment the very moment he should again be in a position to receive it.

When he did at last reopen his eyes, a very cursory examination served to show me that he was perfectly sensible.

For hours he made no attempt to speak,

but lay back on his pillow weak and feeble as an infant. Still, I had every reason to hope that the crisis had been safely passed, and a flood of the deepest thankfulness poured into my heart when the doctor subsequently confirmed me in this opinion.

“There is a very decided improvement,” he observed, in his grave, thoughtful tones, as I followed him out of the room at the close of his visit, and eagerly asked him what he thought of his patient; “and if he has no relapse he will do well. Still, you must exercise the greatest care, you know,” he added, in a cautionary manner, “as any return of the unfavourable symptoms would be fatal.”

“You scarcely expected him to recover?” I remarked, rather hesitatingly.

“Expected!” he replied, with a curious little smile. “Well, no! far from it. I should not have been in the least surprised if I had found him gone this morning.”

“God is very good!” I murmured reverently.

Dr. Elmslie looked scrutinisingly at me as

I said this, opened his lips as if about to make some rejoinder, then closed them again, and with an abrupt movement of the head, intended for a parting salute, he went on his way, leaving me to pursue my reflections in silence and alone.

The first thing I did after his departure was to seek the privacy of my own apartment, where I remained for a little while offering up my grateful thanks for the wonderful mercy which had been vouchsafed to my poor erring friend.

Then I once more returned to Mr. Stafford's room, and made arrangements with Clarkson, the valet, to remain on duty for the next few hours, giving him full instructions as to the precise manner in which the invalid must be treated in the meanwhile, and finally I went to obtain a brief period of much-needed repose.

Mind and body had both been sadly overtaxed of late, and I had sometimes feared lest the strain would prove too much for me, and I should find myself laid up with some unfortunate illness, which would oblige me,

in spite of my wishes to the contrary, to relinquish my close attendance upon my sick friend.

Now, thank God, the worst was over ! and my own relief was so profound, my pleasure so unfeigned and intense, that I felt already quite a new man. All my past anxieties, and the terrible ordeal I had lately gone through, the long-protracted period of agonising suspense, were, not exactly forgotten, but suddenly merged in a great and overwhelming sense of freedom and inexpressible thankfulness.

No gloomy forebodings with regard to the future came to damp my present joy ! I somehow took it for granted that the matter had been transferred into wiser hands than mine, and in any case I had firmly resolved that directly Edmund Stafford should be sufficiently convalescent to enable him to return to England and enter upon his new duties as his father's successor, my own connection with him should terminate.

All that man *could* do, by way of trying to keep him out of the reach of temptation,

I had done ; my mission, therefore, was so far ended, and from henceforth his prospects would be entirely changed ; and with fresh pursuits and new engagements, his estate to manage, tenants to look after, and numerous country occupations to engross his time and attention, he would have a very good opportunity afforded him of starting afresh ; and *if not*—if this last solemn warning should be unheeded and disregarded, there would, I instinctively knew, be no remaining chance for him, no hope of repentance or reformation, as his already broken constitution must inevitably succumb to another similar attack to that from which he had been so mercifully and miraculously rescued.

For several succeeding days he continued in a very weak and enfeebled condition, and his progress towards recovery was, as might naturally be expected, exceedingly slow.

Still he did improve ; and by-and-by was permitted to leave his bed, and essay his strength by taking a few uncertain turns up and down the room.

One thing surprised me, however. He seemed for a considerable time so wrapt up in his own thoughts, that I had a good deal of difficulty in getting him to respond even to the most trifling and commonplace remarks ; while as for starting a conversation himself, or appearing to be interested in anything that was going on around him, he might have been both blind and dumb for all the apparent notice he took either of my doings, or those of any other person.

Sometimes I wondered whether this peculiar taciturnity on his part—so totally different to his old state of effervescing gaiety and love of talking—was indicative of some unusual mental disquietude, and I watched him rather anxiously, not quite liking to force his confidence, as it were, by introducing the subject of my own accord, and yet wishful, if I could do so without arousing his suspicions, to discover what it was which had produced so apparently a depressing effect upon him, and made him so preternaturally absent and distrait—so grave, preoccupied, and silent, and reserved.

As it was part of my duty to open and read his letters, and in most cases to answer them, I had used my own discretion in replying to the telegram announcing Sir Stafford's dangerous illness, and urging him to lose no time in returning to England.

I did not communicate direct either with Lady Stafford or her daughters, having no particular faith in their wisdom and discernment, but addressed myself to the family doctor, a man whom I knew and respected greatly, and who was, I was well aware, entirely in the baronet's confidence, and fully acquainted with all his misguided son's errors and vices.

At first I merely informed him that illness prevented Mr. Stafford from immediately setting out, and promised to write particulars by post—which I subsequently did, and received by return the melancholy news of the dear old man's death, accompanied by a kind and sympathising letter from his medical friend, heartily approving of the cautionary measures I had adopted, and telling me that he had

allowed Sir Stafford to suppose that his errant son was already on his way home, in obedience to his latest request.

And in this faith he actually passed away.

None of these particulars had I as yet made Mr. Stafford—now, of course, Sir Edmund—acquainted with, as I feared what effect the blow might have upon him while he remained in his present moody and dejected state.

Still, I was very uneasy at having to act towards him with such want of candour, especially as I could not be at all sure that some untoward circumstance might not suddenly arise, and reveal the truth to him without any preparation or warning—a contingency which I was most anxious to avoid.

Every day I rose from my bed with the full determination that before the evening should have arrived I would certainly break the mournful intelligence to him; but it invariably happened that something or other in his own manner, some added shade of

gloom or reserve, some impatient monosyllabic response to the first prelusive words I spoke on the subject, shook my resolve, and made me put off the unpleasant task for a short time longer, until he should appear in a more suitable frame of mind to listen to me.

As a rule, he never cared to trouble himself personally with anything in the shape of correspondence. His letters, therefore, were very easily disposed of, otherwise he might soon have gathered from them what had happened, without any intervention on my part, as all kinds of business communications were every day reaching him, and not unfrequently I found myself puzzled to know how to treat them without consulting him on the subject.

At last, however, I was constrained to speak out, and this is how I did it. All my efforts to rouse him, and awaken his curiosity had failed; every attempt I made to lead the way gradually to the serious topic of his father's death had been hitherto frustrated, and my quiet hints that directly he felt

strong enough to give me his attention I wanted to bring forward certain important subjects for his consideration, met by the short remark that he could not be bothered just then with anything in the shape of business; the only course, therefore, which seemed open to me was to come to the point at once, and tell him frankly precisely what I meant.

Accordingly, I plunged one morning boldly into the subject, by saying, significantly :

“ I have bad news for you, Edmund ; are you able to bear it ? ”

“ Bad news ? ” he repeated, somewhat absently ; “ what do you mean ? ”

“ Simply this, my dear fellow,” I answered, trying to keep my own voice as steady as possible, “ your father was taken ill about the same time as yourself.”

“ My father ? ” he exclaimed, rousing himself, and gazing at me with a newly awakened expression of interest.

“ Yes ; I am so sorry,” I went on, slowly and sorrowfully.

"It's nothing very important, I hope?" he remarked, rather uneasily.

I shook my head as I responded, in a low meaning tone :

"Indeed, I'm afraid so ; in fact, to tell you the plain truth, there's no hope."

"No hope!" gasped out my companion, turning deadly pale. "Oh, Charlie! you never mean to tell me that he's really gone?" and he looked searchingly into my face.

I bowed my head assentingly, but made no verbal answer to this plain question, and the next moment the poor fellow's eyes were hidden, and something like a sob broke from his pale lips.

"My dear fellow! I'm so grieved for you," I observed, after a while, laying my hand sympathetically upon his shoulder ; "I did not like to tell you, but it was really needful that you should know."

"Yes, yes," he hurriedly responded, "of course! I understand! only it is so hard," here his lip quivered, and the thin white face grew a shade more ghastly ; "now, too,

when I thought, I hoped, I might be a comfort to him, instead of——”

He paused abruptly, and covered his face with his hands; and I could see that every feature was quivering with agitation.

“It’s very sad, no doubt,” I soothingly remarked, after allowing him to remain undisturbed for a few minutes; “but, sooner or later, we have all to go through something of the kind——”

“Tell me, Charlie,” here he suddenly started up, and seized my wrist with by no means a gentle grasp, “did he know of this last attack—did it hasten his end?”

“No, oh no,” I energetically assured him; “far from it! he fancied, indeed, that you were on your way home.”

“Thank God for that!” and he flung himself wearily back in his chair, and once more closed his eyes.

Presently he spoke again, in a low subdued voice :

“Poor father! I have never been anything but a trouble and a curse to him; and now, just when I was hoping I might be

some little comfort for the future, he is suddenly taken away from me ; how do you make that out, Charlie ?”

“ I cannot pretend to explain it,” I replied, amazed and relieved at hearing him thus indirectly hinting at his own future reformation ; “ all we have to do is to submit to God’s mysterious dispensations, and try to believe that He knows best.”

“ Oh, it is easy for you to talk,” he cried, with a sudden paroxysm of passionate grief, “ *you* who have never done anything to be ashamed of.”

“ You are mistaken,” I emphatically rejoined, “ I have done a thousand things, of which I am heartily ashamed.”

“ But not like me,” was the gloomy retort, while the slight form writhed in a sort of spasmodic anguish. “ Oh, I would give the world, if I could only live my life over again.”

This, then, was the secret of his late depression ! *this* the cause of his silence and gloom !

Ah ! how my heart yearned over him as

he thus spoke, showing that his long-blinded eyes were opened at last to a sense of his own sinfulness.

“The past is no longer ours,” I answered encouragingly, “but there is the present and the future ; and if it is true that we always may be what we might have been——”

“But it’s *not* true,” he broke in hoarsely ; “would to God it were ! How is it possible for my sullied life ever to be made pure and clean ?—how can my shattered constitution ever be repaired ? and how can I get back that peace of mind which might still have been mine, had I not allowed myself to become so deeply entangled in the meshes of evil ?”

“We must of course up to a certain extent expect to reap as we have sown,” I admitted ; “still——”

“I have been thinking it all over,” interrupted my companion, without even appearing to listen to my words, “ever since that night—do you remember it ?—when I suddenly came out of my stupor and heard you praying for me. Never before had I realised the enormity of my guilt or the extent of

my danger. *Now* I can do both ; and oh, Charlie, you don't *know* how miserable I am ! Even if I do turn over a new leaf, as you have been always urging me to do, there will be the old blurred and blotted pages continually staring me in the face."

"But you need not trouble about that," I eagerly explained ; "God says *He* will not remember our former sins ; and if *He* forgets, that is everything. It doesn't hurt *us* I think, to remember, sometimes, what we have been, and what we ought to have been, as it helps to keep us humble."

"Humble?" he repeated, in accents of utter heart-brokenness ; "ah, you don't know how I hate myself ! how bitter and remorseful I feel whenever I reflect upon my own wasted—and far worse than wasted—life. If my father only had been spared," he went on mournfully, "I *might* have tried to make up to him in some slight measure for all the pain and anxiety I have caused him ; but in telling me of his death you have taken my last hope from me."

Here he covered his face with his hands,

and almost groaned in the bitterness of his spirit.

“You have lost a kind and loving father, it is true,” I observed after a while; “but is not God far kinder and more loving? and have you not sinned against *Him* to a far greater extent than you ever did against any mere human being?”

“Ah, yes, I know what you mean,” he answered dejectedly; “but that very fact of itself makes my own case all the more hopeless. If my poor father had lived, *he* might have forgiven me, but——”

A melancholy shake of the head filled up the sentence.

“Is *God* less merciful than man?” I asked, in a low suggestive tone.

He started slightly, and looked at me with a sudden intelligent flash, just as if he understood the inference I wanted him to draw, and would fain take comfort in the thought if he only dared.

At length he said, slowly and questioningly:

“How could I have the presumption to

expect Him to *forgive*, after all my aggravated offences? the only wonder is that He has allowed me to go on so long unpunished."

"Ah, yes!" I assented; "He knew that sooner or later you would repent, and so He spared you."

"Do you really think *that*?" asked my friend, in an eager anxious voice; "isn't it too late?"

"Too late—no!" I fervently responded. "Why did He raise you up from the gates of death, except to show you that what He had done for your poor body, He was able and willing also to do for your soul? and more, far more," I added earnestly, "for the body must sooner or later die, but a saved soul means everything which we could wish or desire, both for time and eternity."

"Oh, if I could only feel that He would forgive," was the agitated reply; "it seems too much to expect after all these years of folly and sin; I don't deserve anything but condemnation and punishment!"

"If we only had our deserts we should none of us be saved," I reminded him; "but

we are distinctly told in the Bible that Christ came to bring not the righteous, but sinners to repentance ; and often, those who are forgiven much, love and serve the more."

I fancied this gave him a little encouragement, but he did not pursue the subject further just then, neither did I.

He had said quite enough to satisfy me that he was thoroughly in earnest in thus deploring his past life of reckless dissipation. Never before had I seen him in this contrite and repentant frame of mind ; for, though he had on several previous occasions given way to spasmodic fits of penitence, and even gone the length sometimes of faithfully promising to give up his evil habits, he had been actuated by none of the deep humility and self-accusing regret which at present characterised him, and when he did chance to confess himself in the wrong, it was done in so careless and defiant a manner, that it almost seemed as if he was inclined to take credit to himself for the admission, and instead of being really ashamed of his conduct, felt

rather as if he ought on the whole to be proud of it.

I do not mean to infer that he had been entirely free from certain seasons of gloom and depression, during which he had taken the darkest and most doleful view of his own condition ; but there had on these rare occasions been no sense of personal guilt, only a kind of morbid reactionary movement taking temporary possession of body and mind after some unusually exciting period of so-called pleasure and feverishly stimulating amusements.

The cases, therefore, were not in any wise similar ; and as I compared the past with the present, as I witnessed the growing seriousness of my erewhile frivolous companion's manner, and noted the humble, yet withal resolute spirit which he manifested, and the anxiety with which he sought to break off all those pernicious habits which had so long and tenaciously clung to him, until they had become quite a second nature, I thanked God and took courage, nothing doubting that the work of reformation which had so

evidently been begun would go on and increase, until he might be able with truth and sincerity to say :

“ Old things have passed away ; all things are become new.”

CHAPTER III.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

“He who reforms himself, has done more towards reforming the public than a crowd of noisy, impotent patriots.”

“A little fire is quickly trodden out ;
Which, being suffer'd, rivers cannot quench.”

“Tower'd cities please us then,
And the busy hum of men.”

AFTER our return to England, Sir Edmund made several efforts to induce me to take up my permanent abode with him ; but for many reasons this would, I felt, be undesirable, more particularly so far as he was himself concerned ; as his changed position and altered prospects, and, above all, the complete transformation which had happily been effected within him, and the sudden deter-

mination he manifested to settle quietly down upon his own estate, and perform the duties of his enlarged sphere with a conscientious desire to carry out all his late father's wise and judicious plans and wishes with regard to the management of his recently acquired property, made him virtually independent of my future services, and left me free to carve out a new and more congenial destiny for myself than that which the force of circumstances had hitherto elected me to fulfil.

It was some time before I could get my friend to look upon the matter in the same light as I did, or agree with me for one moment in the conclusion I had formed as to the advisability of our connection being mutually dissolved. He had grown so accustomed to my society that he was apt to attach an undue and exaggerated importance to it, and greatly over-estimated the few trifling advantages which he derived from any assistance I now had it in my power to render him.

He was so intensely grateful, too, for the

solicitous way in which I had nursed him during his last attack of illness, and appreciated so thoroughly my subsequent endeavours to strengthen him in his good resolutions, and help and encourage him to carry them into effect, that he would not, I believe, have considered *any* sacrifice too great to make, by way of testifying his affection and proving the sincerity of his friendship.

The only thing at last which reconciled him somewhat to my departure, was the consciousness that it might probably be for my own ultimate benefit, as he could not help reluctantly admitting that, to an active-minded, proud-spirited man, the position he offered me (implying, as it must necessarily do, a life of comparative inaction and dependence), would be the thing of all others the most to be shrunk from and avoided.

It would not be pleasant for himself either, I sometimes reminded him, to have me always at his elbow, calling people's attention, as it were, to the peculiar nature of our former intercourse, and inclining them, per-

haps, to suspect that his character was still not quite what it ought to be, and that he required, therefore, the occasional restraint of my presence and assistance ; whereas, if he could only make up his mind to begin his new life unfettered by any of his old ties, and dependent only upon his own resources and those which he received from a higher than human source, he would probably soon learn to get on without me, and be able to enter with pleasure and interest into the various duties which now devolved upon him as the heir to his father's title and estate.

I spent nearly a fortnight with him in the country, helping him to get his affairs into something like order, and then we took a cordial and affectionate leave of each other, and I went away, promising to return and pay him a longer visit on some future occasion ; and in the meantime I engaged to write and let him know what my plans were, and whether he could be of any assistance in helping to procure a suitable appointment for me.

The first thing I did on leaving him, was

to establish myself in a modest lodging in London.

I had sufficient money to last me for a considerable time ; as since poor Mrs. Green's death my expenses had been reduced to a mere nothing, and I felt, after all the excitement I had gone through within the last few months—all the intense anxiety I had suffered—the mental and physical fatigue—that a little rest and freedom from worry was absolutely necessary for me, before I should launch forth afresh into the world's arena, and occupy myself in another sphere of duty.

It is not everyone who would have selected *London* as the place most suitable for recruiting one's exhausted powers : but a great city always possessed a singular attraction for me, and it was positively refreshing to me to witness the tide of busy life which was going on around me, to view from afar the sights and sounds of the vast moving multitude ; it did me good — exhilarated and braced me up, taking me, so to speak out of myself, and making me look upon everything in a broader and less one-sided light than is sometimes

the case, more particularly when we have been called upon to go through certain passages of sharp and painful experiences, and feel in consequence naturally weary and depressed, and inclined to spend far more time than is good or profitable for us either in gloomily reproducing the past, or dwelling with a kind of melancholy insistence upon our present lack of health or strength, thus unconsciously doing our best to retard our own progress towards recovery, while at the same time we foster within us a selfish and morbidly absorbed spirit, such as leads us, while musing exclusively upon our personal affairs, to lose entire sight of those of other people.

Immediately on our arrival in England, I had written to inform Mr. Vaughan—so far as I knew then myself—of my future plans.

Greatly to my surprise, I received in course of time a few hasty lines traced in the vicar's handwriting, dated from Paris, whither he had gone, he said, with his daughter for a month's holiday.

After this, I did not again hear from him until I had been some weeks in London, and I

was just beginning to wonder whether he had returned to Saltsea, when I met with himself in *propria persona* in the most sudden and unlooked-for manner.

I had fallen in, quite by chance one morning, with my old friend and ally, Lord Willoughby ; and he had insisted on taking me home with him, and introducing me to his wife, a charming and agreeable lady whom he had married about three years previously.

In their society the time passed rapidly, and it was growing quite late in the afternoon before I could tear myself away from them, so kind and hospitable were they, and so deeply interesting the various topics of conversation which his lordship from time to time started, and the graphic accounts he gave me of the sayings and doings of certain of our mutual acquaintances, whom I had long ago lost sight of.

I should probably have been detained still longer, but they happened to have a long standing dinner engagement for that same evening, and required time to dress.

Having at last reached my quiet lodging near Portman Square, I let myself in with a latch-key—this latter indulgence I may mention, *en passant*, had been entirely unsolicited on my part, although from the mysterious, confidential way in which my worthy landlady tendered it to me, with the condescendingly complimentary remark that she believed I was thoroughly to be trusted, it would naturally appear as if it had been the very desire of my heart thus to find myself provided with the means of self-admission.

Then I proceeded upstairs; opened the door of my comfortable little sitting-room, and walked in.

I expected, of course, to find it tenantless; instead of which, to my extreme amazement, I discovered a tall dignified-looking form quietly reposing in the only chair which could properly speaking be called *easy*, precisely in front of the fire.

“Mr. Vaughan! is it possible?” I exclaimed, going up to him with outstretched hands; “surely I must be dreaming!”

“ I suspect it is *I* who have been the dreamer,” he answered, starting up with a sudden energetic movement to return my greeting ; “ and I am sure it is no wonder,” he went on, glancing ruefully around him, “ when you take into consideration the trifling fact that for two mortal hours have I been cooped up in this dingy den, with nothing on earth to do except read a paper ” —pointing superciliously towards it—“ ten days old.”

“ If I had only known you were coming,” I observed, regretfully, “ I would have been here to receive you.”

“ Well, the fact is, I wanted to surprise you,” he said, eyeing me with a frank smile : “ we only arrived yesterday.”

“ *We!*” I mentally repeated ; “ does that include his daughter, I wonder ?”

Aloud I said :

“ You certainly *have* surprised me most pleasantly. I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you again !”

“ Ah, I thought you would be !” he cried, with an air of gratification, and

once more seizing my hand, he wrung it heartily.

“And how is Miss Vaughan?” I presently inquired, in as composed a voice as I could command.

I fancied he looked at me rather keenly as I asked the question, and—it *might* certainly have been imagination—but I could not help thinking that his manner grew a shade graver while answering, with apparent unconcern :

“You must come and see her, and then you can judge for yourself: she fully expects me to bring you back with me.”

“She’s not here, is she?” I asked; and if my tone was slightly eager I could not help it—“not in London, I mean?”

“Yes; did I not tell you I’ve brought her up to show her a little of the world? I thought it would do her good. My sister-in-law, Mrs. Dalton, has always been urging me to give her a season in London, and at last I decided that I would take advantage of her repeated offers to be of use, and get her to go about with Laura—chaperone her

to a few pleasant parties, and all that sort of thing, you know, just to give her a little variety."

Lower and lower sank my heart as these suggestive words fell on my ear.

A season in London! Yes, I knew perfectly well what *that* meant; and if she was out of my reach before, when leading a quiet country life, with comparatively few people to sound her praises and admire her beauty, what would she be now, surrounded as she probably soon would be by a crowd of flatterers, all of whom would doubtless be, so far as wealth and position went, a thousand times more eligible than myself?

"You needn't suppose, however, that she's going to turn into a regular butterfly," laughed Mr. Vaughan, after watching my face with rather an amused expression; "she is far too sensible for that, and has serious notions, too, as to what is right and fitting for a clergyman's daughter. There are certain things, indeed," he went on, thoughtfully, "that she flatly sets her face against, and not all the arguments in the world

would induce her to act against her principles."

"I can quite believe that," I murmured, in a low, constrained tone.

"Now, my dear fellow, let me look at yourself!" suddenly exclaimed the good-natured vicar, as he laid his hand upon my arm and gazed fixedly into my face; "it strikes me that you are ill;" this was added very concernedly, and with an expression of real sympathy.

"Oh no," I quickly replied, "I am not ill, only I feel that I shall be the better of a little rest. The fact is," I explained, seeing him look anything but convinced, "before we left India I suffered a good deal from loss of sleep—poor Edmund was laid up, you know, and as there was no one else at hand whom I could trust, I had to do most of the nursing myself."

"Yes, yes; I have heard all about that," was the unexpected answer. "I wrote to Sir Edmund for your present address—as your last letter was unfortunately mislaid—and in return he favoured me with an epistle

seven pages in length, setting forth in the most glowing language all that you had done for him—saving his life being, according to his showing, only one of the wonderful feats you have performed on his behalf—in fact, he hinted pretty plainly that until lately your life with him had been a sort of purgatory. At first I was so astounded and amazed, I did not know what to think about it; then I fancied it must be the ravings of a distorted imagination, a kind of mad, enthusiastic friendship which he had suddenly conceived for you, an idolatrous affection such as made him take an exaggerated view of everything connected with you; but now that I have seen you, I positively begin to think there must be some truth in his self-accusatory outburst, and that you *have* suffered, more perhaps than you care to confess.”

“I’ll tell you all about it some day, if you like,” I said, in a putting-off tone, “as I mustn’t let you think worse of him than he deserves; and whatever he *has* been,” I went on, seriously, “I can assure you he’s all right now.”

“I gathered from his letter that there had been a change of some description,” was the half-mystified rejoinder, “and that *you* were the person instrumental in bringing it about. He seems very much disappointed at your refusing to accept the position which he offered you, as his ‘more than friend and brother,’ this is the way he puts it, but between ourselves, I quite approve of your resolution.”

“I am glad of that,” I simply responded; “I did not quite know how you would take it, but it seemed to me the only sensible course to be adopted.”

“Quite so,” was the heartily concurrent reply, “and in my poor opinion—but, dear me,” interrupting himself with a sudden jerk, “what am I thinking of? Poor Laura will be quite tired of waiting dinner for us. Just look at the hour,” and he pulled out his watch.

I scarcely knew what to say on receiving this evidently implied invitation; consequently I said nothing; seeing which, Mr. Vaughan, apparently taking it for granted

that I would accompany him, proceeded briskly :

“Come along, Charlie, there’s not a moment to lose.”

“But, my dear sir,” I remonstrated, rather hesitatingly, “do you think——” and then I paused.

“Do I think *what*?” he demanded, stopping short just as he had reached the door, and regarding me with a slightly bewildered expression.

“Will it not be an intrusion on my part?” I stammered, “putting in an appearance to-night?”

“An intrusion! what rubbish!” exclaimed my clerical friend, with more force than politeness; “really, Charlie, I’m ashamed of you,” and he glanced reproachfully at me.

“Well, I’ll come then,” I observed, after an instant’s irresolution; how indeed could I have done otherwise? “I only thought Miss Vaughan might not care to see me so soon after——”

“There, don’t make any more excuses,”

peremptorily observed Mr. Vaughan, nipping my would-be apologies in the bud.

Five minutes later we were sitting together in a hansom, the enterprising driver of which, having received an intimation from my friend that the quicker we reached our destination the larger would be his own fare, made such strenuous efforts to urge his horse forward that we very soon arrived at the country vicar's *pro tem.* residence, and were at once conducted into his daughter's presence.

She came forward with a frank and pleasant smile, put her hand kindly and cordially into mine, and then, turning playfully towards her father, began to take him to task for his long absence.

"You mustn't scold me, my dear," he answered, as he nonchalantly subsided into a chair; "it's all Charlie's fault. For two hours I did penance at his quarters, and very uncomfortable quarters I must say I found them;" this was intended for a *sotto voce* observation; "and then, when he did at last make his appearance, there was so much to talk of that I forgot all about a certain

young lady of my acquaintance who doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Oh, you naughty papa," laughed Miss Vaughan, "you've often told me that I am a model of patience."

Thus saying, she once more turned towards me, and taking my arm, led the way to the dining-room.

"Were you not very much surprised to see papa?" she inquired of me later on in the evening.

"Yes," I replied, quickly averting my eyes from her face, whither they *would*, in spite of myself, every now and then wander; "it was so unfortunate that I happened to be out," I went on, in an explanatory tone, "but I had been spending the day with Lord Willoughby."

"He's a very pleasant man, I hear," put in the vicar's voice.

"Oh, very," I quickly responded; "you know he travelled with us for some time," I said, once more addressing the young lady.

"Yes, I remember," she promptly re-

sponded, "you told us about him at the time."

"He has married since then, and has got a little son of whom he is so ridiculously fond," I continued.

"Well, he *ought* to be fond of him, I suppose," demurely remarked Miss Vaughan. Then, quickly changing her tone, and looking at me with a soft, wistful light in her lovely eyes, she exclaimed abruptly: "Why did you not let us know that you had been ill?"

"Ill!" I repeated lightly, though a rapturous thrill pervaded my whole frame on observing the air of evident interest with which she was regarding me; "what makes you think there has been anything the matter with me?"

"Think!" she repeated, with one of her old scornful flashes; "I am not blind."

"I really fear I *must* be looking cadaverous then," I remarked, with a half smile, "for Mr. Vaughan taxed me with the same thing."

"It is not kind of you to try and deceive your friends," was the gentle, low-toned

reply, and I had much ado to prevent my eyes from thanking her for the implied sympathy.

“You don’t ask me about Edmund Stafford,” I observed, by way of changing the subject on the one hand, and the wish, on the other, to find out if possible whether she had got over her former *penchant* for him.

Her answer completely reassured me on this latter point, for there was not the slightest hesitation in her manner or voice, as she said indifferently :

“I’ve heard all about him from papa ; he lost his father, poor fellow ! and now it seems he has lost you too”—here she smiled rather archly. “It is a perfect mystery to me,” she proceeded, with a sagacious shake of her head, “how he will ever contrive to exist without you.”

Was she laughing at me ? I wondered. Anyway, I kept my own gravity quite unmoved, as I explained, in all sincerity :

“He has grown more self-reliant of late.”

“Self-reliant !” here she gave way to an irrepressible fit of merriment, which made

her father lay down the volume he had lately taken up, and ask, with an air of interest, what the joke was?

“Oh, it’s not much of a joke, papa, only he,” pointing towards myself, “calls Sir Edmund Stafford self-reliant, and I could not help laughing, as I should never have given him credit for being able to acquire that character if he were to live to be a hundred.”

“Laura always insists on calling him weak-minded,” apologetically interposed the vicar.

“Why, I always fancied you liked him,” I blurted out, in my clumsy, tactless way, as I turned my eyes with an eager, questioning gaze upon her face.

“Liked him!” she musingly echoed, while the faintest of smiles flickered over her lips: “well, even so; granting that I *did* like him,” putting a strong emphasis upon the word, “that would not prevent me, I suppose, from despising him nevertheless?”

“Despising!” I mechanically answered, a sudden astounding revelation coming to my mind.

Was it possible that all the time I thought she was pleased and gratified with his attentions, and led away by his flatteries, she was merely drawing him out for her own amusement ; gauging his character, making herself fully acquainted with his weak points, and being as well informed perhaps as I was myself as to the real value of his sentimental regard for herself ? If so, what an egregious fool I had been, tormenting myself unnecessarily, and running the risk of placing her in a false position, by taking it for granted that because she derived a certain degree of amusement in his society she must perforce be in danger of falling in love with him !

“ That is a very strong word to use, my dear,” observed Mr. Vaughan, in a tone of mild remonstrance.

He probably misconstrued my silence, and the sudden state of abstraction into which I had fallen, and feared I might be hurt at hearing my friend alluded to in such slighting terms.

“ Then you think the two are compatible ?”

I asked, rousing myself, and looking rather curiously at the frank-spoken young lady.

“Quite,” she unhesitatingly responded; “you can like a person without having a very exalted opinion of his character, I suppose?”

“There are different degrees of liking,” I suggested.

“No doubt,” spoken ironically; “and in this case, *of course*, I alluded to the very highest degree which the human mind feminine is capable of entertaining towards anyone.”

“You are sarcastic,” I said, secretly pleased at the fact.

“Oh, not at all,” she mockingly assured me; “I am only trying to gratify you by doing your friend justice—and even more than justice!” this was added in a perfectly audible aside.

“He is a better man now than when you knew him,” I ventured to observe.

“There was probably room for improvement,” she slightly replied.

I glanced speculatively at her for a moment

(Mr. Vaughan was by this time nodding in his chair), then, possessing myself of a vacant seat close beside her own, I asked, with hesitating significance :

“Don’t you remember taking me to task the last time I saw you?”

“Yes, I remember!” she impulsively exclaimed, a crimson flush overspreading the delicate features ; “and I was very rude and unkind.”

“Oh, don’t say that!” I deprecatingly interposed.

“But I apologised afterwards, you know,” she continued, with frank simplicity ; “and I thought you promised to forget all about it?”

“I only wanted to remind you that you were angry with me on that occasion for sending him away from you ; and I naturally concluded that you had taken a fancy to him.”

“That was just your stupidity,” she answered, with a little petulant movement which transported me back to the old days of unconstrained enjoyment ; “I told you at

the time you were stupid—and so you were!”

“I do not intend to dispute that fact for a single moment,” I rejoined, feeling as if I would rather be blamed by her than praised by anyone else.

“I am not *quite* destitute of sense, you know,” she went on, confidentially; “and when I saw you giving me credit for caring for a poor, infatuated, weak-minded, conceited creature like that, I must confess it irritated me—it was humiliating, don’t you see.”

“Oh, if I had only known!” I muttered; and then I set my lips firmly together, mentally apostrophising myself in anything but complimentary terms.

“What are you two quarrelling about?” demanded Mr. Vaughan, as he emerged at this instant from a comfortable doze; and rising from his seat, he surveyed us both with an expression of benevolent interest.

“We are not exactly quarrelling, papa,” was the laughing response; “but if we *had* been, I suppose you would have laid the blame entirely at my door, as you always

used to declare that our quarrels were one-sided affairs."

"Yes, I'll say that for Charlie, whatever *you* might say or do, however you might try his patience or disturb his plans, he never *would* get angry with you."

"Angry!" I retorted, with more warmth perhaps than prudence; "I should think not, indeed!"

"I hope you don't mean to insinuate that I was too insignificant a person for you to quarrel with?" remarked Miss Vaughan, in pretended indignation; "because if so, you can scarcely expect me to thank you for the compliment."

"I hardly think I need make any attempt to vindicate myself from *that* particular charge," I significantly made answer; "you must know perfectly well, without being told, what I really felt on the subject;" and, with a little smile, I held out my hand to take leave.

CHAPTER IV.

A DIFFICULT PATH.

“ But he who stems a stream with sand,
And fetters flame with flaxen band,
Has yet a harder task to prove—
By firm resolve to conquer love !”

“ Earth’s joys are but a dream ; its destiny
Is but decay and death. Its fairest form
Sunshine and shadow mixed. Its brightest day
A rainbow braided on the wreaths of storm.”

MR. VAUGHAN seemed at first inclined to make a point of my giving up my present lodgings and going to stay with himself ; but I felt that for many reasons this would be a most undesirable arrangement, and one which would necessarily expose me to a vast amount of superfluous mental disquietude.

After spending that first evening with them, indeed, I had almost come to the conclusion that the less I saw of the Vaughans just then, the better it would be for myself ; so difficult did I find it to carry out the *rôle* which I had long ago laid down for my own guidance ; so hard to keep my passionate feelings under control—to guard each word and look, lest I should in some unwatchful moment betray my heart's secret, and allow the object of my deep, unalterable devotion to guess how strong and fervent was my affection ; how entirely she occupied my thoughts both by night and day ; how powerfully the mere touch of her hand or glance of her eye could affect me ; how beautiful and bright everything appeared when *she* was near ; how dull and gloomy when deprived of the sunshine of her presence.

Not that I had ceased to struggle against these unwise and imprudent emotions, or that I did not exert myself to the very utmost to cultivate a resigned and cheerful spirit ; but we all know something perhaps

of the "strength of love:" how hard it is to crush it out when once it has taken possession of the human heart; how it continues to burn long after we have done our very utmost to quench it; and how, when we may perchance fondly congratulate ourselves on having at last succeeded in shaking ourselves free from its shackles, a chance word or look, a face-to-face meeting with the apparently forgotten one, suddenly brings the tide of passion back again, and makes us realise in all its painful intensity the fact, which we may only have dimly and with a vague perception comprehended before, that

"Love is indestructible."

This is just how I found it as the days came and went, and, in spite of all my efforts to keep away, in spite of all the excuses I from time to time made for not accepting Mr. Vaughan's somewhat peremptory invitations, backed up, as they not unfrequently were, by Laura herself, I was still in the same uncertain state as before, hovering, mothlike, around the candle which sings its

own wings, simply and entirely because I could not help myself: I *could* not wholly absent myself from their society without arousing their suspicions as to the true state of the case—an occurrence which would have the unfortunate effect of causing us all more or less embarrassment, and be an insuperable bar to our future intercourse.

The first time I was introduced to Mrs. Dalton, I could plainly see, by the slightly cold and dubious way in which she received me, and the shrewd, penetrating glances with which she forthwith proceeded to favour me, that *she*, at any rate, was not disposed to be prepossessed in my favour; but, on the contrary, seemed rather to look upon me as a sort of dangerous character, a detrimental, who might possibly prove an obstacle in the way of her own plans with regard to her beautiful young niece.

She watched my conduct narrowly; and whenever I spoke to Miss Vaughan, I was uncomfortably conscious that every word I uttered was weighed and cogitated over by this lynx-eyed woman of the world; my

manner scrutinised, and my whole conduct exposed to her unfriendly criticisms.

Unpleasant, however, although this restraining influence undoubtedly was, it might, had Mrs. Dalton continued to exercise it, have proved a certain advantage, by furnishing me with an unanswerable argument for absenting myself from Laura Vaughan's drawing-room; but, greatly to my own amazement, I discovered that in a very short time the elder lady's doubts seemed to vanish. She may probably have been misled by my grave, reserved manner, and persuaded herself into the belief that the sentiments I entertained towards her niece were of a simply fraternal nature; anyway, she graciously relaxed her own severely frigid demeanour, and even condescended to admit me to a place in her confidence and esteem—a distinction which I would gladly have dispensed with if I could, inasmuch as I was made the recipient of all her own ambitious views with respect to Miss Vaughan's probable future, and expected to evince the most profound interest and satisfaction in a subject

which naturally caused me nothing but exquisite pain.

Mrs. Dalton's own character was rather a peculiar one. To use her own favourite expression, she could not "do anything by halves:" if she disliked you, she took no pains to conceal the fact; if she doubted, she did it thoroughly and honestly; and if, on the contrary, she had reason to consider a person worthy of trust, she was unlimited in the confidence she reposed in him.

This accounted for the disapprobation with which she at first regarded me. She evidently thought I should take advantage of my old intimacy with her brother-in-law, and try to engage the affections of his daughter; but directly she had cause—or fancied so—to alter her opinion, she went to the other extreme, and treated me from henceforth with decided *empressement*.

Being so very open herself, she could not probably fathom a character like mine; and she would have been swallowed up in amazement, could she have only known the wild torrent of ungovernable thoughts which were

surging through my mind, while I remained outwardly calm and cold as ice, listening to her long, rambling accounts of this man's admiration of her niece, asking me what I thought of the merits of another who had manifested signs of being seriously attracted by her, and so on, until I could scarcely contain myself, so various and conflicting were the emotions called up by her plainly expressed, not to say slightly unrefined way, of alluding to so delicate and important a subject as the disposal of the young lady's hand.

"You see, you have known her nearly all her life," she would sometimes observe, in a half apologetic tone, "so you must naturally take a deep interest in her welfare."

"Of course," was my general response.

"And really it is a relief to me," she proceeded one day, after she had, as I thought, exhausted the subject, "to be able to talk over matters with a sensible person like yourself; in fact," she added, evidently under the impression that she was paying me the politest of compliments, "I sometimes forget your age altogether, and treat you almost as

if you were an elderly man,"—this was so self-evident that she might have spared herself the trouble of mentioning it. "My poor brother-in-law, you know, although an excellent man in many ways, is sadly deficient, so far as anything in the shape of right-minded ambition is concerned."

Privately I wondered what she meant by right-minded ambition; but before I could make any rejoinder she went on, in a confidentially lowered voice :

"Indeed, I must tell you, between ourselves, that I do not receive the slightest assistance or encouragement from him in all the efforts I am making to get his daughter happily established in life. Now, there's Mr. Darringford, for instance—you may probably have met him—he has a beautiful place near Saltsea, Darringford Hall——"

"Yes, I know," I assented; "I've heard of him, but never saw him, that I am aware of."

"Well, he proposed for Laura two years ago," she went on, slowly and impressively.

"Two years ago," I mused, feeling a strange thrill at my heart. "Is it possible?"

"Yes; and she actually refused him, although I told her at the time that he was one of the best *partis* going."

"But that is past and gone," I observed, rather impatiently, for I was longing to make my escape.

"Not exactly," was the mysterious rejoinder, accompanied by a solemn shake of the head; "he has asked her again, quite lately, but finding her still apparently in the same mind, he begged me to use my influence with herself and her father, by way of getting them to reconsider the matter."

"And what does Mr. Vaughan say?" I asked, seeing that I was expected to make some remark.

"Oh! he goes on in the most ridiculous way about not wishing to interfere in so delicate a matter. He will not even listen to reason, and when I try to point out the advantages of the match he gets quite angry, and declares all the wealth of the world

would not signify unless Laura cared for the man himself. It's my belief," continued the much-aggrieved lady, waxing warm, "that for anything *he* cares, she might just throw herself away upon a man without a penny, provided his character was irreproachable, and he had the good fortune to please and satisfy *her*."

"I think you are mistaken there," I observed, in a quiet, constrained voice ; "Mr. Vaughan is, I know, a decided enemy to unequal marriages, and he would never consent to his daughter engaging herself to a man who was not in every respect properly qualified to make her a suitable husband."

I rose as I spoke, and frantically seized my hat ; but before I could reach the door it was opened, and Miss Vaughan entered the room, saying, in her bright, pleasant voice :

"I am so sorry to have kept you waiting, Aunt Jane, but papa wanted me to write a letter for him. Why, you are not ready yourself," she went on wonderingly, and then, her eye getting sight of me, she added, with a laugh : "I see how it is : you have

been enjoying a little intellectual conversation."

"I certainly forgot my engagement," replied Mrs. Dalton, rising from her seat with just the slightest shade of embarrassment; "but I will go and put on my things now, and perhaps Mr. Hale will try to amuse you until I come back."

And with a significant glance at me she departed.

"Poor Aunt Jane!" this was Miss Vaughan's amused exclamation after she had left us. "I suppose she has been pouring into your ears the story of a chaperone's cares! She is a dear, well-meaning creature, but oh! so tiresome."

"She seems very fond and proud of you," I murmured somewhat absently.

"Oh, no doubt! rather *too* fond and proud to be altogether agreeable," returned the plain-spoken young lady in a tone between jest and earnest.

"I'm afraid I must go now," I said presently, feeling as I always did when left alone with her, a strange sense of awkward-

ness and constraint, utterly unable on the one hand to go through the farce of talking on trivial, common-place subjects, and not daring, on the other, to trust myself to trench upon more confidential ground.

“Very well, *pray* don’t let me detain you,” she replied, in what seemed to me a very hurt and offended tone.

“Detain me!” I tremulously echoed, as I fixed my eyes inquiringly upon her flushed countenance, wondering meanwhile what I could have said or done to vex her. I should probably have gone away without another word, but as I looked at her the indignant flash disappeared, and something strangely like tears glistened in her eyes, while the sensitive mouth began to quiver, just as I had seen it do a hundred times before when the tender, loving heart had been agitated by some childish grief.

Down went my hat, therefore, upon the nearest chair, and instead of taking my departure as I had intended, I found myself the next moment addressing her in those cordial, elder-brother tones which I had tried

so hard to cultivate ; and, as in those old times, so now, all traces of annoyance vanished like magic from the fair, sweet face, which soon became radiant with smiles, and suggestive only of good temper and happiness.

“ Why were you so anxious to get away from me ? ” she asked, after peace had been thus satisfactorily restored, and we had been talking together for some time on subjects of mutual interest.

“ Really,” was my significant answer, uttered with a smile, “ if you *will* ask such absurd questions, I shall think that, knowing my anti-flattering tendencies, you are bent on improving my education in this respect, and forcing me, as it were, to pay you compliments against my will.”

“ I hate compliments,” she retorted, with a little grimace, “ but there is such a thing as common courtesy, you know ; and when you get up the very moment I enter the room, and manifest the greatest eagerness to be gone, what construction can I possibly put upon it, except——”

“If you had a tithe of the vanity which characterises some of your sex,” I hastily interrupted, “you might naturally come to the conclusion that it was the fact of my doubting whether you would not consider my own presence a bore which made me wish to beat a rapid retreat before you should have time to give me a hint on the subject.”

“Ah, you know better than that,” she said, shaking her head and looking rather mystified; “you *know* how glad papa and I always are to see you.”

“Don’t you think, then,” I said, changing my tone to an earnest reflective one, “that when there is a real and long-trying friendship and regard,” I brought out each word with slow distinctness, “between people, certain things in their mutual intercourse should be taken for granted?”

“What sort of things?” she inquired, looking at me with a serious, wistful expression in her eyes.

“Well, for instance, in this case, respecting myself,” I explained, rather incoherently, “if I *had* gone away, could you not have con-

cluded that I really had some good reason for doing so, without giving me credit for such a very absurd and unjust one as that which you suggested?"

"Was it absurd?" and I could see a faint colour steal into the cheeks, while a very decided smile came to the mobile mouth.

"Most absurd!" I unhesitatingly responded; "just think of all the years we have been friends,"—how little she guessed the effort it was to me to keep my so-called *friendship* within discreet bounds.

"Yes; but you are not quite the same now as you used to be," observed Miss Vaughan, with just a shade of hesitancy in her manner; "you are graver——"

"I was always grave, if you remember."

"And sometimes," she went on, without paying any attention to this reminder, "you look so stern and—and not happy!" this word came out almost in a whisper, and she glanced at me half deprecatingly as she said it; "and then, you know," she continued hurriedly, reassured, I suppose, by the fixed expression of my face, "papa and I would

always comfort you if we could, only if you won't let us, we cannot help it."

"What an ungrateful wretch I must be," I replied, not caring for her to know how much her simple kindly words had moved me; "the only excuse I can make is that knocking about the world *has* changed me; made me rough and bearish, and——"

"Oh no, don't say that!" and her soft hand was laid gently upon my arm, while she lifted her serious, sympathising eyes to my face; "I dare say it was very stupid of me to notice it at all; papa told me——"

What he told her, however, I was never destined to learn, as just as she had arrived at this particular part of her sentence, we were once more joined by Mrs. Dalton, whose toilette now being completed, she was ready to set out with her on their previously arranged shopping expedition, after which, she graciously informed me, they were going to make a round of calls.

I escorted them to the carriage which had been for some time kept waiting, and then I lifted my hat, and watched them drive off,

quite forgetting to respond to Mrs. Dalton's cordial invitation to lunch with herself the following day—an invitation which I had, however, no intention whatever of accepting, being not at all desirous of having to listen to a repetition of her own grievances on the score of Mr. Vaughan's lack of sympathy with her in the ambitious plans she had formed with regard to the disposal of his daughter's hand.

From henceforth I made up my mind that I would see as little as possible of this scheming, worldly wise woman, who seemed to consider her niece's happiness a matter of secondary importance compared to the—in her eyes—far more serious question of wealth and position. I felt, too, that it was placing myself in a false light, thus voluntarily to play the part of confidant on a point where I was personally so much interested: it made me feel as if I was a sort of hypocrite, pretending to agree with her, while all the time my own heart was pleading loudly against those very doctrines which I seemed by my silence to be tacitly agreeing to.

I sometimes wondered whether Mr. Vaughan had any suspicions as to the kind of sentiments I entertained with regard to his daughter.

Occasionally I fancied I could detect a sort of puzzled expression upon his face as he looked at me ; a kind of semi-mystification, which seemed to say that something or other in my own conduct bewildered and perplexed him ; but he certainly never once said or did anything to lead me to suppose that he had the slightest fear of my ever allowing myself to be led away by my feelings, or acting an imprudent or dishonourable part, either towards himself or Miss Vaughan.

So far, indeed, from placing any obstacle in the way of our frequent intercourse, he was himself most unaffectedly pleased to see us together, a circumstance calculated of itself to make me all the more anxious to avoid betraying my attachment for one so far above me as his beautiful and wealthy young daughter. Common gratitude, if nothing else, I constantly reminded myself, must for ever keep my lips sealed on this delicate and

tabooed subject; and humiliating though the thought might be, that Mr. Vaughan's lack of caution and prudence in thus encouraging my visits probably arose from the consciousness of the utter disparity of our mutual positions, and the little chance there was of my having the presumption to dream of aspiring so high, it yet served in some measure to regulate my conduct, by making me realise with fresh distinctness what my own duty was, besides filling me with a melancholy sense of satisfaction in the thought of thus having it in my power to merit the confidence which was placed in me by the scrupulously fastidious and high-principled vicar.

By calculating ways and means, and examining into the exact state of my finances, I discovered that I had quite sufficient funds to enable me to qualify myself for the legal profession; and as I had long ago fancied that this was a calling for which I was peculiarly suited, I thought I could not do better than commence my studies under the able direction of a very clever barrister with

whom I fortunately happened to be acquainted, and who cordially undertook the task of furthering my views, and initiating me into all the mysteries and technicalities of the particular branch of learning in which he was himself so deeply interested.

Accordingly, I lost no time in joining him at his chambers, and beginning to prepare for the new life which lay spread out before me.

I should not perhaps have brought matters to a climax *quite* so soon, had I been differently situated, as my physical health was not yet wholly re-established, nor the mental balance entirely restored, so great and overpowering had been the strain inflicted on both during that terribly depressing period of suspense consequent upon Edmund Stafford's last dangerous illness.

As it was, however, I thankfully hailed the opportunity thus afforded me of being able to bring forward a real and legitimate excuse for not spending too much time with the Vaughans.

So long as I had nothing to do, I found it

most difficult to evade their kindly offered invitations ; but now that I was positively studying for a profession, they could not of course blame me for not wishing to desert my post ; and although I had something even yet to bear in the way of earnest remonstrances from the vicar (who feared I might injure my health by beginning so soon to apply my mind to these abstruse legal subjects) and sundry petulant and indignant speeches from his daughter, I certainly reaped the advantage of the arrangement I had so suddenly entered into in many ways, and found that it was on the whole a decided success.

CHAPTER V.

I MAKE A STRANGE AND STARTLING DISCOVERY.

“All around him was calm, but within him commotion and conflict :

Love contending with friendship, and self with each generous impulse.

To and fro in his breast his thoughts were heaving and dashing,

As in a foundering ship, with every roll of the vessel, Washes the bitter sea, the merciless surge of the ocean !

‘Must I relinquish it all ?’ he cried, with a wild lamentation ;

‘Must I relinquish it all, the joy, the hope, the illusion ?’ ”

NEARLY four months had passed away, and the Vaughans were thinking of returning to Saltsea, when one morning, happening to have a short time to spare, I went to pay

the vicar a visit, purposely selecting the hour when I knew his daughter would be out.

I found him in anything but a comfortable frame of mind, his sister-in-law having, as he proceeded to inform me, been worrying him with regard to Laura's unkind treatment of Mr. Darrington.

"The fact and truth is, Charlie," he observed, shrugging his shoulders and looking very much perturbed, "he's one of those pertinacious fellows who positively refuse to take 'No' for an answer; and by some means or other he has contrived to get so completely round Mrs. Dalton that she could not, if he were her own son, take his part more thoroughly, or evince more interest in his affairs."

I made no reply to this. What, indeed, could I say? it was obviously no concern of mine; and yet I felt, as I always did when any approach was made to this delicate subject, very much embarrassed and ill at ease.

Presently Mr. Vaughan raised his head,

and glancing at me rather inquiringly, asked abruptly :

“ You have seen Mr. Darringford, have you not, Charlie ?”

“ Yes, I have met him several times lately,” I answered, in as composed a tone as I could assume.

“ And what do you think of him ?” He asked this question rather eagerly.

“ I scarcely know enough of him to venture on an opinion,” I replied, somewhat hesitatingly.

“ No. Well, perhaps not,” and a curious smile came to the vicar’s lips “ He bears a high character, though, and is much respected in the county ;” this was added musingly.

“ I suppose when *you* return to Saltsea, he will go back to Darringford Hall ?” I observed, with a sudden, jealous pang.

“ It depends on circumstances,” returned Mr. Vaughan ; “ he is going to make one more attempt, it seems, to induce Laura to agree to his wishes, and failing in that, he will probably go abroad.”

I stammered out some meaningless re-

joinder, and after a few minutes' cogitation, the vicar went on, meditatively :

"My sister-in-law has made me promise that I will speak to Laura on the subject. She fancies she does not know her own mind, and that if she could only be brought to see the excellences of Mr. Darringford's character, she would be sure to accept him. But I must confess," here he glanced at me, I thought, with a keen, penetrating expression, as if to discover what my own ideas on the subject were, "I have the greatest possible objection to meddling, even in appearance, in so delicate a matter. I wonder," this was said with a very perceptible degree of hesitation, "whether *you* could just sound her on the subject, and find out what objection she really has to him?"

"I, my dear sir?" I exclaimed, in an amazed, incredulous tone, feeling my face flush hotly at the very idea; "how *could* I?"

"Oh, it would be the most natural thing in the world," he equably rejoined; "she has a great respect for your judgment."

“But I could not possibly presume to offer advice in a case like this,” I remonstrated : “it would be the height of impertinence.”

“Not at all, my dear fellow,” interrupted Mr. Vaughan ; “whatever happens, Laura would be sure, I know, to give you credit for at least good intentions.”

While I was considering how best to get out of my present awkward position, the vicar went on, slowly and impressively :

“You see, Charlie, up to a certain point my sister-in-law is right. It *would* be a great comfort for me to see the dear girl happily settled in life ; as in the event of my being taken, she would be very lonely and unprotected. She has so few relations, and—in fact, I don’t like to contemplate such an idea.”

He stopped somewhat abruptly, and then once more looked at me, as if to mark the effect of his words.

But, although my heart was beating wildly, and I longed to say, “While *I* live she will never want a friend, but ever be the first and foremost in my affection and regard !” I

pressed my lips firmly together, dropped my own eyes confusedly upon the table, and remained silent.

“What do you say, Charlie?” Mr. Vaughan asked, presently, in a strangely agitated voice; “will you undertake the task?”

Ere he could finish his sentence, the door of the room where we were sitting was suddenly opened, and his daughter stood before us.

“Have you returned from your walk, dear?” he asked, instantly composing his features; and then, without waiting for a reply, he turned smilingly towards myself, saying, in a would-be cheerful and indifferent tone, “Here is Charlie!—quite a stranger, is he not?” and as I came nervously forward to shake hands with her, I felt, rather than saw, that Mr. Vaughan’s eyes were fixed with a very peculiar expression upon my face; and from the fact of his making an excuse the next moment for leaving us, I naturally concluded that he wanted me to take advantage of the present opportunity for carrying out his suggestion.

"I am afraid I must have interrupted a most interesting conference," observed Miss Vaughan, gazing at me with an amused look; "what was it all about?"—and having taken off her dainty little hat, she leant gracefully back in her chair, and regarded me with that half persuasive, half imperious expression which so well became her, and was, so far as I was concerned, simply irresistible.

"We were talking about you," I observed, very slowly and hesitatingly.

"About me?" and a quick flush sprang over the fair face, while the laughing eyes fixed themselves with a softened expression upon my own gravely perturbed countenance.

"Yes," I went on, desperately, feeling as if I was deliberately signing my own death warrant, "about you and—and Mr. Darrington."

"How *dare* you join our names together like that!" she flashed out, with passionate impetuosity.

"Wait a moment, Laura,"—the name

slipped out unawares—"don't scold me just yet," I went on, gravely, "I know that, properly speaking, it is no business of mine."

"Of course not," was the scornful interjection; "much you care!"

"I care so far," I replied, in accents of earnest cordiality, "that to see you happy I would do almost anything; and if it is really true that——"

"Go on," she said, in a voice of stifled sarcasm, as I paused irresolute, finding my task harder even than I had anticipated.

"Well, it is just possible you know that your aunt may be right," I continued, presently, "and that you do not quite understand the nature of your own feelings towards him. It is only natural, therefore, that she and your father should be anxious for you to reflect well before giving him your final decision, as he seems to have many excellent qualities, and——"

"Pray do not trouble to finish your sentence," she hastily interrupted, rising indignantly from her seat, and confronting

me with flashing eyes ; " I can imagine the rest."

" Now I have made you angry," I ruefully exclaimed, " and really I can't wonder at it !" I added this in a self-accusatory voice ; " it certainly *is*, to make the best of it, a most unwarrantable piece of interference on my part, to presume to offer an opinion on so purely personal a matter. Won't you forgive me?" and I made a little involuntary movement to take her hand.

" No," she said, in a low quivering voice ; " if it had been anyone else I would not have minded it, but I did not think *you* would have been so unkind !"

" Unkind ?" I repeated, stepping back almost as if I had been dealt a heavy blow.

" Yes ; what else is it but unkindness to wish me to marry a man I don't care a straw about ?" was the bitter rejoinder.

" God forbid that I *should* wish it !" I exclaimed, in all sincerity.

" Oh yes, I understand," she indignantly responded ; " you think, I suppose, that if I

do not like him, I ought to !” She raised her head with a gesture of defiance as she said this, and looked at me, her soft eyes expanding with an expression of angry scorn, though I could plainly see, by the trembling of the sensitive lip, that pain was blended with the anger, and that, for some mysterious reason or other, she considered herself peculiarly aggrieved at *my* having thus presumed to speak to her on so delicate and weighty a subject.

And as I gazed wonderingly, and with a kind of wistful inquiry into her flushed face, a swift transition came over it ; and I found myself regarded with a mutely sorrowful and reproachful look, strangely mingled with something else—an indefinable and unexplainable *something* which caused a sudden ecstatic thrill to pass through my entire being, like a flash of light, as the wild and improbable conjecture for the first time occurred to me, that the reason she so keenly resented my having even the appearance of wishing her to marry another arose from the astounding and scarcely-to-be-comprehended

or realised fact, that she had actually learnt to care for myself!

It seemed incredible! and yet—ah me! what else did it mean? that tender reproachful look, that soft shy glance of unconscious significance, the hurried confused manner, the timid constrained way in which the beautiful eyes shrouded themselves beneath their lids, lest I should read *all* that they might otherwise have expressed, and lastly, the nervous anxiety she manifested to get away from me? Surely I could not be mistaken; and however inclined I might feel to call myself vain, and conceited, and presumptuous, for *daring* to entertain the idea for a single moment; however energetically I might try to believe that it was nothing but a creation of my own vivid and distorted imagination, I could not succeed in banishing it from my mind, or checking at a moment's notice the wild tumultuous tide of pleasurable emotion which the very *thought* of such a strange unlooked-for revelation had awakened within me.

In spite of all my long-practised self-

control, and that calm, reserved manner, which so often enabled me to hide my own agitated feelings beneath a quiet and composed exterior, I could not, I fear, have succeeded on this occasion in acting with that prudence and reticence which Mr. Vaughan might naturally have expected from me. All caution and disguise might, indeed, have been thrown to the winds, my former good resolutions forgotten, the scruples which had hitherto characterised all my dealings with her have suddenly and for ever vanished, and words been spoken which could never be recalled ; but almost before I had had time to realise my own position, or comprehend the true state of affairs, I found myself suddenly left alone, standing in the middle of the room like one who doubts whether he is awake or asleep—whether he is in his right mind or the victim of some hallucinatory influence which makes him regard everything in a visionary and unreal light, tinged with a kind of supernatural colouring such as has the effect of puzzling and distracting him, and throwing him into a state of mental

chaos and confusion from which he finds it no easy matter to shake himself free.

How long I stood there I know not ; but at last I mechanically took up my hat and made the best of my way out of the house, being fortunate enough to escape without again encountering Mr. Vaughan or any other member of the establishment.

The next thing I remember was plunging forward at a rapid rate through the densely crowded City streets, never once pausing in my absently headlong course, until I was suddenly brought to a stand by hearing a stentorian voice at my side politely asking me whether I was mad ; and when I raised my eyes for the purpose of discovering the cause of this most extraordinary address, I found myself in the detaining grasp of a friendly policeman, who had just rescued me from the wheels of a passing cab, which, but for his timely services, would probably have inflicted some serious injuries upon me.

After making a suitable acknowledgment to him for his prompt assistance, I went on

my way in a more sober and cautious fashion, and by the time I reached the dingy little office allotted to myself by the learned and distinguished member of the bar who had undertaken to direct my own legal studies, I had recovered in some degree my usual manner, although I still felt strangely perturbed in spirit, and found it utterly impossible to stem the tide of contradictory emotions which came surging wildly through my recently disordered mind.

My first sensation on thus getting, as I fancied, an insight into the state of Laura Vaughan's feelings, was, as I have already explained, as nearly akin to rapture as anything which I had ever yet experienced; but other and widely different thoughts soon succeeded, for even supposing that my premises were correct, and that the only girl for whom I had ever entertained a particle of affection *did* in very deed return my love, would not this fact rather add to my difficulties than diminish them? For, so long as *I* was the only sufferer, it was comparatively easy for me to resign myself to what seemed inevit-

able, and make up my mind to live without the one coveted good which alone appeared wanting to render my existence a perfectly happy one.

Now, the thought that *she* too might be suffering, caused me the most exquisite torture, while the remembrance of my own clumsy *mal à propos* remarks, and the pains I had taken to conceal from her the passionate devotion with which I really regarded her, only added to my distress by making me fear lest I should unintentionally have wounded her sensitive spirit, and, instead of doing her the least good, had rather produced a contrary effect, and been the unfortunate means of plunging her into a far more uncomfortable and embarrassing position than that in which I had found her.

Sometimes I tried to persuade myself that I had misinterpreted the meaning of that one brief glance which had caused me such unutterable amazement and delight ; for, without wishing to give my readers a better opinion of my character than I deserve, I think I may venture to affirm that I was on the

whole free from anything in the shape of personal vanity, and not at all inclined, as a rule, to lay the flattering unction to my soul that I was a likely subject to call forth the love of a beautiful and fascinating girl such as Laura Vaughan undoubtedly was.

Still, in spite of its apparent improbability, in spite of the lowly estimate I had of myself when *she* was in anywise concerned, I could not dismiss the idea from my mind. I might, and did, bring my reasoning powers to bear upon the subject; but what is reason when compared with that subtle instinct which requires no words to elucidate its meaning, no argument to convince us of the truth of that which it reveals, no logical inferences from which to draw our conclusions?

Just as a flash of light let suddenly into a darkened room silently reveals the various objects which had been hitherto shrouded in mystery, or we feel our senses affected by the delicate perfume of flowers, without being able to describe the precise way in which we have discovered the fact, or a sudden note of

music unlocks some hitherto sealed-up chamber containing the heart's most sacred memories, or a chance word or look serves to reveal a secret which we had long ago sought in vain to know, so was it with myself! I could not have explained it even to my own mind and understanding; but the *consciousness* was there, and there it would remain, whether I could intellectually receive it or not.

Some men might, in my position, have derived a certain amount of comfort and encouragement from the thought of the personal kindness which I had always received at Mr. Vaughan's hands, and the evident favour with which he regarded me; but it never once occurred to me to indulge even the shadow of a hope that he might, upon the strength of our individual friendship, be led to tolerate for a moment the idea of seeing his only and fondly cherished daughter throw herself away—this is doubtless how he would put it—upon a nameless, fortuneless man, who had nothing whatever to recommend him in the eyes of the world—no assured

present position, no settled income, even, with which to support a wife, and no brilliant future prospects to look forward to.

There was, of course, just a remote chance that he might eventually yield a reluctant consent to our marriage, if he had sufficient evidence to show that it would positively conduce to Laura's happiness ; but how could I bring my naturally proud and independent spirit to take pleasure in the thought of receiving, at some far distant day, this grudgingly offered gift ? How, indeed, could I ask it of him at all, without laying myself open to the charge of ingratitude on the one hand, and abuse of confidence on the other ? —an imputation from which I shrank most painfully, being intensely (morbidly, perhaps) sensitive on this particular point, and always especially anxious to avoid having even the appearance of wishing to take an undue advantage of his kindness and good nature.

There was no possibility of my being able to settle to anything in the way of study during the remainder of that day—my mind

was in a far too agitated and discomposed state for that ; and when I retired to rest at night, I found it quite out of the question attempting even to sleep.

All I did, therefore, was to toss restlessly about on my pillow, wondering what I ought to do in this fresh emergency ; how it behoved me to act with regard to the strange discovery which I had, as I thought, made, or whether, indeed, it was my duty to act at all.

What would be the best for her ? This was the burden of my many-sided and conflicting reflections. What the wisest course to adopt so as to secure her future comfort and happiness ? Should it be speech or silence ? Ought I to come boldly forward and openly avow my own sentiments, leaving the result with herself and her father ; or bury her secret with my own, and by thus giving her time to get over what *might* only prove a passing, and as yet unacknowledged, fancy for myself, indirectly connive at her eventually marrying some one else ?

When I sat down to my solitary breakfast the following morning, I suddenly remembered that I had engaged to dine with the Vaughans that very evening, and afterwards accompany them to a musical party at Lord Willoughby's.

In my present unsettled frame of mind, however, I felt that I should be totally unable to go through such an ordeal, without in some way or other committing myself; and yet how to get out of it I knew not, as it had been entirely to please me that the Willoughbys had called upon Mr. and Miss Vaughan, and it would, to say the least of it, be very ungracious on my part, were I to refuse at the last moment to fulfil my promise, and make one of the party on this, the first occasion on which they had appeared at any of her ladyship's musical gatherings.

After considering the matter, therefore, I decided that I would, instead of joining the vicar and his daughter at dinner, merely call for them at the hour when they would be ready to start for their later engagement.

In this way I should at all events provide against anything in the shape of another *tête-à-tête* with Laura Vaughan, a pleasure just then by no means to be desired, and at the same time not run the risk of allowing her to suppose that I had read her secret, which might probably have been the case had I resolved to stay away from them altogether.

I wrote, accordingly, a hurried note to Mr. Vaughan, excusing myself for being unable to dine with them, but expressing a hope that I might arrive in time to accompany them to Lord Willoughby's, as had been previously arranged.

Having sealed and sent off this note, I tried to concentrate my attention—though without much success—upon my usual occupations, looking forward in the meantime with curiously mingled feelings to my next meeting with Laura Vaughan, and inwardly wondering whether I should be able to keep my own emotion under control, and speak and act just as if nothing had occurred within the last twenty-four hours to disturb

or agitate me, or make me look upon herself in any other light save that which I had for so long a time forced myself to regard her—a dear and valued friend and sister, but nothing more !

CHAPTER VI.

DO YOU NOT LOVE MY DAUGHTER ?

“ Thus things are strangely wrought,
While joyful May doth last ;
Take May in time—when May is gone
The pleasant time is past.”

“ For him in time’s depths still is fixt,
The web of black and white hue mixt.”

I WAS sitting alone that same afternoon, and ostensibly engaged in writing, but in reality doing nothing more or less than chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancies, when the door of my little sanctum was suddenly thrown open by the boy who was employed by my friend Mr. Longley for the purpose,

and Mr. Vaughan made his unexpected appearance.

"I hope I am not disturbing you?" he carelessly remarked, as I threw down my pen and started up with rather an embarrassed air to receive him.

"There's nothing wrong?" I inquired, somewhat anxiously.

"Oh no!" he hastened to assure me; "we are all well, so far as that goes; only I thought I should like a few minutes' conversation with you, and feared I should not get the chance if I were to put it off until to-night."

"You received my note, I suppose?" I observed, as I once more resumed my seat, and began nervously to fold up a sheet of paper.

"Yes, that is why I am here," was the quiet answer. "I had been looking forward to your spending the evening with us, but as you cannot come till late——"

"I shall be sure to turn up in time for the Willoughbys!" I exclaimed, scarcely con-

scious that I was interrupting him in the middle of his sentence.

“Well, I hope so, but at any rate *that* doesn’t promise much, so far as *I* am concerned, as I shall probably not have an opportunity of exchanging two words with you.”

“Was there anything particular you wanted to say to me, then?” I forced myself to ask.

“In the first place I should like to know whether you took my hint yesterday,” was the significant reply, “and spoke to Laura about Mr. Darringford?”

“Yes, I told her what you said,” I shortly responded.

“You did?” comfortably settling himself in his chair, and eyeing me rather oddly, I thought; “and with what success?”

“None!” was my laconic rejoinder.

“Ah! I never expected much,” returned Mr. Vaughan, speaking, to my amazement, in a perfectly complacent voice; “it’s my firm conviction, and has been so for some

time past, that her affections are fixed on some one else, and——”

“Then why did you set me the unnecessary and by no means pleasant task of getting on the subject with her at all?” I could not help saying.

“Because I wanted you to find out *who* that some one else was,” came the slowly significant reply, and though my own eyes were swiftly averted from his face, I felt uneasily conscious that he was regarding me with a keenly penetrating glance, as if he would fain discover just what was passing in my mind, and frame his next words accordingly.

Perfect silence reigned between us for the next few seconds. Then Mr. Vaughan once more spoke, and this time his voice was neither clear nor steady, but very low and tremulous.

“Laura’s happiness is dearer to me than my own,” he said; “and although, to please my sister-in-law, I hastily promised that I would say a word in Mr. Darrington’s

·favour, I never for one instant dreamt of her marrying him."

"Why, then——?" I once more commenced, in a hesitatingly aggrieved tone.

"Why did I commission you to ascertain her feelings on the subject, you would ask?" remarked my companion, with rather a tantalising smile; "well, I have already answered that question. I was anxious to find out whether my suspicions were correct, whether she really cared for some one else, and, if so, *who* that person was!"

"But, my dear sir, even supposing that your surmises were correct, what possible good could result from the discovery of a secret which Miss Vaughan might probably wish to keep to herself?" I remarked, in an outwardly quiet tone, though my heart was all the time torn with emotion.

"What good?" retorted Mr. Vaughan, rising excitedly from his seat, and beginning to pace the floor, "my dear Charlie," here he stood still and looked grimly down upon me, "if you will excuse my saying it, you are a fool!"

Having thus relieved his feelings, he again took possession of his chair, and fixed his eyes steadily upon my face, as if to note the effect of his words.

“It’s not exactly an agreeable fact to be reminded of,” I drily responded, “but I really begin to think I *must* be one, for I am certainly quite at a loss to understand your object in seeking to drag *me* into an affair of such extreme delicacy——”

“Never mind about that,” quickly interrupted the impatient clergyman, “just answer me this one question : Do *you* not love my daughter?”

“Pardon me,” I said, looking at him rather proudly, for, on this point at least, I felt that I deserved credit, rather that otherwise, for the way in which I had acted towards him, “but may I inquire whether I have ever said or done anything——”

“I don’t want to discuss your sayings or doings, my dear fellow,” energetically exclaimed Mr. Vaughan ; “I only want a simple answer to my question.”

“Well, you shall have it,” I replied, with

a kind of gloomy desperation ; “ I never intended you to know it, but there is nothing to be ashamed of in the confession, and—in fact, I *do* love her, and have done so, I believe, ever since I first saw her.”

Then I stopped, and pressed my lips stoically together, waiting to hear how he would receive the announcement.

“ I guessed as much ! ” this was all he said, and after a brief pause I went on huskily :

“ *She* has no suspicion as to the true state of my feelings ; I have done my very best to prevent *that*, so that you, at any rate,” I added this rather defiantly, “ can have nothing to reproach me with.”

“ Reproach you, my dear boy ? ” and I was perfectly astonished at the kindness of his tone ; “ I would rather help you.”

“ Help me ? ” I repeated, in accents of semi-mystification.

“ Yes : help you to shake off those ridiculous ultra conscientious scruples which have hitherto prevented you from following the dictates of your own heart——”

“ But, Mr. Vaughan—do you know what

you are saying?" I gasped out, in utter bewilderment.

"Perfectly," he coolly rejoined; "there is no man living to whom I would more willingly consign my daughter than yourself."

"*What!*—in spite of my lack of name, and fortune, and——"

"In spite of everything," came the smilingly significant assurance. "You are a gentleman," he went on presently, "no one could ever for a moment doubt that; and better still, you are a Christian—what more, therefore, could I require?—while as to your worldly position, I see no reason to be anything but satisfied with it, as I am perfectly certain you will soon get on in your profession, and probably become in time a really distinguished member of it."

For some minutes I was positively kept silent from sheer inability to speak, so absolutely unprepared had I been for any such *dénouement* as this.

At last I tried to stammer out a few words of thanks, but my emotion was so deep that I found the greatest difficulty in suitably

expressing myself, and it was more, I think, by my manner and appearance, than from anything which I said, that Mr. Vaughan discovered how truly glad and grateful I was.

“You fancied my language rather strong when I called you a fool just now,” he smilingly observed, towards the end of his visit, “but really, Charlie, it was true ; for had you possessed a spark of practical common sense, you would have known that, if I had objected to you as a future son-in-law, I should never, under any circumstances, have permitted you to spend so much time in Laura’s society.”

“The very fact of your trusting me so thoroughly,” I frankly informed him, “made me all the more anxious to deserve your confidence.”

“There are certain temptations to which one man has no right to expose another ;” was the significant reply. “Besides, there was Laura’s peace of mind to be considered—no less than your own.”

“Ah ! I never thought of that,” I answered humbly ; “how could I for one moment suppose——”

“That she would learn to care for you?” put in the vicar, as I paused in confusion, “well, I, for one, cannot see anything at all surprising about it. Not,” he added quickly, “that she has ever said a word to lead me to infer that she *does* look upon you in any other light than that of a confidential and affectionate friend; still, actions speak louder than words, you know, and putting one thing with another, I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind as to the present state of her feelings towards you. That is a question however,” he went on in a lighter tone, as he rose from his seat and looked about him for his hat, “which I must leave you to find out for yourself: all I can promise you is that on my side, at least, there shall be no difficulties.”

“Thank you,” I cried warmly, grasping his proffered hand; “I *will* find out. But,” I said this slowly and thoughtfully, “have I your permission to do it in my own way?”

“Of course,” was the somewhat astonished reply.

“What I mean is this,” I explained, with

frank directness, "I have been doing my very best of late to hide my love from her; consequently our intercourse has been constrained and uncomfortable, as I was always afraid of committing myself in some way. Now, thanks to your kindness and generosity, I can let her see me as I am--return, as it were, to my old natural self; and in this way I shall, please God! soon succeed in winning her confidence, and so gradually prepare her for my proposal; whereas, if I were suddenly to go from one extreme to the other, and come abruptly down upon her without first taking pains to *win* her affection, it might look as if I was making too sure of her; and—you know her delicately refined and sensitive nature—perhaps have the effect of disturbing and perplexing her."

"Yes, yes, you are quite right," heartily responded the other; "perfectly right! Take your own time, my boy, and in the end you are sure to succeed."

"I hope so," I answered cheerfully, for my heart felt lighter than it had done for many a day.

“Well, I won’t detain you longer now,” was Mr. Vaughan’s parting remark. “I shall see you again to-night. *What* a pity it is,” he added maliciously, putting his head in again at the door, after he had left the office, “that you cannot join us at dinner.”

“Perhaps I may manage it yet,” I answered briskly.

“Ah, I thought so,” and I could hear him laughing to himself as he turned finally away; “I won’t tell Laura though—it will be a pleasant surprise.”

Never before had my dingy little den looked so bright and cheerful as it did that afternoon. I could scarcely recognise it as the same place where I had been accustomed of late to brood over my troubles, and muse bitterly on the solitary life which I was from henceforth doomed, I fancied, to lead; for with me, to love once was to love for ever, and however much I might have wished it, I could no more have transferred my affections from Laura Vaughan to any other girl, than I could alter the planetary system, turn day into night, or summer into winter.

Not that I considered her perfection—far from it: she had her faults and failings, just like other people, and no one was more conscious of the fact than myself; but if these faults had been far more numerous than they were, I should still have loved her with a deeper and stronger affection than I should ever have it in my power to love anyone else.

How Mr. Vaughan had discovered my secret, I knew not; but he prided himself on being more keen-sighted than his neighbours, so far as deciphering character was concerned; and although I had not hitherto given him credit for possessing anything uncommon in the way of that intuitive discernment which undoubtedly distinguishes some people in a very remarkable degree, I began to think his own estimate of himself must, after all, be a correct one; and that he certainly *had* the gift of being able to penetrate beneath the surface, and form his own conclusions as to what was passing in a man's mind, without requiring the intervention of words to help him to arrive at a pretty accurate decision.

I had been so very guarded in my own manner when in his presence—had concealed so effectually, as I thought, the state of my feelings, and been so particularly anxious to avoid letting him know what it cost me to carry out, in actual practice, those cautionary and prudential resolves which are so easily made, but so difficult in their fulfilment—it took me greatly by surprise, therefore, to find him thus master of the situation : completely *au fait* as to the exact position of affairs, and thoroughly conversant with the precise motives which had actuated me in never venturing to overstep the prescribed limits which I had, with calculating nicety, laid down for myself in my late intercourse with his daughter.

I had always liked and respected Mr. Vaughan as an individual (though I privately doubted whether he was quite suited for the particular vocation he filled) ; *now* the liking was increased ten-fold ; and as I reflected upon the kind and generous spirit he had manifested towards me, the cordial way in which he had come forward to smooth my

path, treating me not as a superior dealing with one who occupies a much lower level than himself, but as an equal, man with man—no trace of pride or hauteur in his manner, no tinge of condescension in his tone—I felt my heart drawn towards him with a sense of grateful appreciation, such as it had never experienced on any previous occasion ; and I think it would have astonished him not a little could he only have known the full extent of the gladness and relief he had been the means of affording me.

I could plainly see, by the surprised expression which came over Laura Vaughan's face when I made my appearance that evening shortly before dinner, that her father had acted up to the intention he had expressed with regard to keeping her in ignorance as to my change of plans.

She was sitting in the drawing-room alone, with a book in her hand, which she instantly deposited upon the table as I came forward rather more eagerly than usual, and asked her how she was.

“Is it really yourself?” she inquired,

trying to speak lightly, though I could see the colour coming rapidly over the soft cheeks, while she hastily averted her eyes ; “papa told me you had written to say you would not be able to come.”

“I’m afraid it’s very rude of me, treating you with such scant ceremony,” I answered, with a smile, “but when it came to the point I could not resist the temptation.”

“*Was* it a temptation ?” she demanded, somewhat dubiously, fixing her eyes, as she spoke, with an incredulous expression upon my face.

“Indeed it was,” I promptly responded, “in proof of which I am here.”

“And what becomes, in the meantime, of all that important business which papa said would detain you ?” she asked, with an air of constraint.

“It must just take care of itself,” I replied ; “one can’t be always at work, you know.”

“No, I suppose not,” was the evidently amazed rejoinder ; “but I thought, as a rule, you were inclined to attach almost too much importance to it.”

“Depend upon it, that won’t last,” I laughingly replied ; “indeed, between ourselves,” I added, seriously, “I am thinking of getting a few weeks’ holiday.”

“Indeed !” was the coldly spoken reply ; “you want to go abroad, I suppose ?”

“Well, no ; I *want* to go to Saltsea,” I observed, with suppressed eagerness. “I feel as if it would do me all the good in the world to have a look at my old haunts ; and if I can only get Mr. Vaughan to renew the invitation he gave me the other day, I might return with you.”

“Would you really like it ?” This question was put in a totally different tone.

“Above all things !” was my energetic response ; “only you must n’t let me bother you, and if you really think I shall be in the way, you must candidly say so.”

“You are not afraid of being dull ?” inquired my companion, with the nearest approach to her old confidential manner that I had yet seen.

“Dull !” I repeated, in accents of semi-reproach ; “was I ever dull *there* ?”

"Ah! but you have changed since then," she answered, with a half smile.

"Not for the better, I fear, judging from the frequency with which you have reminded me of the fact," I remarked, glancing rather thoughtfully at her.

"Very impertinent of me," she returned, in a tone of semi-apology.

"Not at all," I replied, in a calm serious tone, "only honest; and I like honesty."

"So do I," chimed in the good-natured vicar, who had just entered the room, "though I am, of course, quite in the dark as to what this original remark is apropos to."

The dinner being at that moment announced, I was spared the necessity of entering into any explanation, and the conversation soon drifted into other, and less personal channels.

Before we started for the Willoughbys', however, I found an opportunity of repeating to Mr. Vaughan what I had already said to his daughter, regarding my wish to return with them to Saltsea; and he instantly

seized upon the idea, and appeared so pleased and gratified with the proposal, that he seemed almost inclined to set out the next day, in spite of the trifling fact of his having made arrangements for remaining in London for at least another fortnight.

He delicately refrained from taxing me with my apparent fickleness in thus veering suddenly round, and eagerly asking for a renewal of an invitation which I had previously declined in the most unequivocal terms, but spoke and acted on the occasion just as if he considered it the most natural and sensible thing in the world that I should unhesitatingly decline one day that which it seemed the very height of my ambition to obtain the next.

“I told you all along you were working too hard, Charlie,” he observed, in a grave, matter-of-fact tone, after this question had been finally settled, and we found ourselves once more in the drawing-room; “you ought to have taken my advice and been content to wait a while before settling down to a profession. The only wonder is,” he

went on, meditatively, "that you are as well as you are, considering what you went through in India."

"By-the-by, that reminds me," I hastily exclaimed, by way of changing the subject, "I heard from Sir Edmund this morning.

"And is he getting on well?" courteously inquired Mr. Vaughan, while a curious little smile stole over Laura's lips.

"Yes, I think so," was my reply; "he seems far more cheerful and contented than he was, though, from what he says, I fear he is not at all strong. I question, indeed, whether he ever will be," I added, rather sadly.

"Poor fellow!" was the kindly sympathising response.

"He is exerting himself manfully to do all the good he can," I continued more brightly, "and seems just now to take the greatest interest in the building of a set of model cottages for the occupation of the workmen on his own estate, besides going on with other improvements which the late Sir Stafford had set his heart on."

"How pleased you must be to find him turning out so well."

"Indeed I am—delighted!" I answered heartily; "I was so afraid he would never be able to settle down to a quiet country life."

"Will it last, do you think?" asked the vicar, rather hesitatingly.

"Yes, I hope so," was my confident reply; "you see," I went on seriously, "it's not as if he trusted to himself; he has got something stronger and better to lean upon."

"Do you mean religion?" asked Laura, with that quick intuition which enabled her to read my thoughts before I had expressed them.

"Yes," I said, giving her an appreciative look, "it helps him to do what he would never otherwise have strength for."

Here Mr. Vaughan took out his watch, and having attentively regarded it, he directed a speculative glance at his daughter.

"I am not dressed, papa, if that is the question you would ask," she laughingly

observed, as she rose from her seat and prepared to leave the room; "but I shall not be long."

"What are you going to wear?" I inquired, as I held the door open for her to pass out.

"Wait until you see!" was the evidently amused rejoinder; "it is not a good thing to encourage curiosity." And with a playful movement of her head she went on her way.

"You seem to have established a tolerably friendly footing with her already," complacently remarked the proud father, after her departure.

"Yes, she has got one of the sweetest tempers in the world!" I enthusiastically replied; "and now that the embargo is removed——"

"A self-constituted one, be it remembered," significantly parenthesised my companion.

I thanked him by a look, and went on thoughtfully:

"——and I am no longer afraid to speak and

act naturally, she will, I trust, soon begin to understand me better than she at present does. Lately, you see, I have been doing my very utmost to act a part, as it were, and it is not at all surprising that she should consider me very strange and inconsistent, and at times even be inclined to resent my apparent want of frankness and sincerity."

"Do you know, Charlie," exclaimed Mr. Vaughan rather abruptly, after a pause, "I have often wondered lately that you did not think of entering the Church, instead of choosing the profession of a barrister."

"The Church!" I repeated, in accents of surprise; "the idea never once occurred to me, and if it had, I should have dismissed it at once, as I am not at all fit to be a clergyman."

"Why not?" he hastily demanded. "I should have said it was the very thing for which you were the best suited."

"Ah! you do not know me as well as I know myself," I answered gravely. "Besides, I have very strong opinions on that subject."

"What sort of opinions?" questioned Mr. Vaughan, in an encouraging tone, as I

paused, suddenly conscious that he was not exactly the person in whom to confide on a matter of this kind.

“You won’t think me rude or personal?” I hesitated, seeing that he waited with an expression of interest for my forthcoming explanation.

“Certainly not,” was the prompt assurance; “forget my cloth, if you can, and tell me just what you mean.”

“Well, then, what I feel is this : a clergyman’s position should be a very peculiar one: he ought, according to my theory, to look upon himself as specially set apart by God to perform a certain sacred office, and to that work he should devote his whole energies of body and mind ; not only teaching and preaching the truth, but practising it in his own daily and hourly experience ; abjuring, not merely in name, but in very deed and truth, the pomps and vanities of the world ; be, in short, a living epistle, manifesting the beauty of holiness in his own conduct and character, and by the persuasive influence of his loving and consistent life allure to

brighter worlds and lead the way. Unless, therefore, I was prepared to act like this, I would never undertake so solemn and responsible a charge as that which seems to me to devolve upon those who enter the ministry."

"And no wonder!" cried Mr. Vaughan, lifting up his hands in amazement.

"You think I take an exaggerated view of the case?" I remarked interrogatively.

"*Think!* I am sure of it!" was the energetic reply.

"It is of course easy to theorise," I admitted, "and I can quite understand that there may be many difficulties to encounter——"

"You may as well say *impossibilities*," suggested my clerical friend; "for, between ourselves, I really don't know where you will find your ideal clergyman! You have raised far too high a standard, you see, and as a natural consequence you must necessarily be disappointed; for there is no such thing as perfection to be met with in this imperfect world, I suspect."

“No, but it is the striving after perfection that I speak of, not the actual thing itself,” I explained; “and don’t you think that the man who consecrates his time and talents, and everything he possesses to the one great work of saving souls, keeping his eye steadily fixed upon the only perfect example the world has ever known, and humbly endeavouring to walk in His footsteps, must unconsciously reach a loftier and more exalted altitude than those who are content to try themselves by the lower and more restricted measure of man’s incompetent earth-bounded judgment.”

“You think, then, a clergyman should occupy an entirely different platform to that of the rest of the world,” observed Mr. Vaughan, beginning to move restlessly about on his seat, while a sort of perplexed expression came over his dignified features, “you forget, apparently, that he is, after all, only a man, with a man’s weaknesses and temptations: the mere fact of his having entered the Church does not perforce elevate his character, or make him holier than other people.”

“I know that,” I answered, hesitatingly, “but do you not understand my meaning: unless a man is holier than other people, he ought not to enter the Church at all.”

“Ah! as I said before, you expect too much,” was the grave rejoinder; “you are nothing more or less than an enthusiast——”

“Perhaps so,” I absently replied; “but I believe, nevertheless, that there are many earnest devoted men——”

“Have you ever met with any of them?” eagerly interrupted my friend.

“You know what a strange wandering life I have hitherto led,” I quietly reminded him, “without the chance even of seeing enough of a person to form a correct estimate as to his general life and conduct; still, I have met one who seemed to embody everything——”

“I should like to see him,” impulsively exclaimed Mr. Vaughan, without waiting for any further description.

“You cannot; he is dead,” I simply informed him.

“Ah ! he was probably too good to live,” was the dry response.

Before I could make any answer to this extraordinary view of the case, we were joined by Miss Vaughan, and five minutes later we were all seated in the carriage which was waiting to convey us to the Wil-loughbys’.

CHAPTER VII.

THIRTY THOUSAND POUNDS.

“A king might lay his sceptre down,
But I am poor and nought,
The brow should wear a golden crown
That wears her in its thought.”

“What say’st thou, wise one?—that all powerful love
Can fortune’s strong impediments remove;
Nor is it strange that worth should wed to worth,
The pride of genius with the pride of birth.”

I HAD never seen Laura Vaughan look more beautiful than she did that night, and it was quite evident, from the many admiring glances which were directed towards her from various quarters, that I was not the only one who appreciated her charms.

Her manner was naturally very attractive,

and although she had been almost entirely brought up in the country, and might therefore be supposed to be lacking in that *savoir faire* which marks the city-bred belle, there was not a trace of self-consciousness or affectation on the one hand, or shyness and stiffness on the other, about her, all her movements being particularly easy and graceful, and characterised by that air of gentle dignity which bespeaks a thoroughly refined and delicate mind.

Her father might well be proud of her, I thought, as I marked the air of fond complacency with which he from time to time regarded her; and much as I wondered at Mr. Darringford's bad taste, in persisting in his attentions after she had so plainly given him to understand that he could never be anything more to her than he was at present, I could yet sympathise with him, to a certain extent, in the anxiety he manifested to get her to respond, in some small measure, to his long-continued and faithful devotion.

I had not expected to have met him at Lord Willoughby's, but there he was, appar-

ently on the look out for us ; for almost immediately after we entered the drawing-room, I saw his keen eyes singling out Miss Vaughan, and in a few minutes later he had made his way to her side, where he threatened to remain a fixture for the rest of the evening.

My own attention was soon called away by our pleasant hostess, who, upon the strength of my old friendship with her husband, had promoted me by this time to a semi-confidential place in her individual regard, and did not hesitate to employ me in various little ways in order to relieve herself from some of the minor responsibilities of her position, and furnish amusement for certain of her guests who seemed otherwise in danger of being overlooked or neglected.

The very moment, however. I could do so with politeness, I transferred a talkative young lady who had been consigned to my care into the temporary charge of someone more likely to appreciate her society than myself, while I proceeded to look for Laura Vaughan.

I soon discovered her sitting just where I had left her, with nothing better apparently to do than examine the painted flowers on her white satin fan, her companion meanwhile leaning over her chair, and talking to her in the most animated way, without appearing to notice the shortness of her replies, the slightly bored expression of her beautiful flushed face, or the general listlessness of her manner.

Not until I had advanced to within a few feet of her did she look up, and then, by some species of magnetism, our eyes met, and a sudden smile illuminated her countenance, while she made a little movement as if to make room for me; but the very next moment the pleased look had disappeared, the light died out of her eyes, and an air of coldness and constraint became visible in her whole demeanour, so that I might, but for that first glance, have easily persuaded myself into the belief that I was the very last person in the world she wanted to see, and that the sooner I again left her the better would she be satisfied.

So far, however, from being annoyed or repulsed by this purposely assumed frigidity—the meaning of which I was at no loss to understand—I was rather encouraged than otherwise; and instead of leaving her in her present uncomfortable and embarrassing position, I went close up to her, and, after exchanging a careless greeting with Mr. Darrington, said, in a voice which would, I knew, show her that I was thoroughly in earnest:

“Won’t you let me take you into one of the other rooms? It is far too warm for you here.”

I offered my arm as I spoke, and after glancing at me with rather a puzzled look, she took it; observing, as she turned gracefully towards Mr. Darrington:

“I am sure you will excuse me, but, indeed, I shall be most thankful to get into a cooler atmosphere.”

“Of course you will,” I smilingly remarked, as I bore her triumphantly away, supremely indifferent to the consternation and chagrin of her late companion, who

stood looking after us with a very ireful visage ; “ I should have come for you before, but have been ‘ on duty ’ until this moment. I hope,” I added, bending down and speaking in a low sympathising tone, “ he has not worried you much ? ”

“ Really, you are an enigma ! ” she exclaimed, scarcely knowing whether to be amused or angry. “ Yesterday you were pleading this very man’s cause, just as if he was your own brother ; and now— ” a significant shrug filled up the sentence.

“ Circumstances alter cases,” I observed, after I had ensconced her in a tolerably quiet corner, in one of the ante-rooms, which pictures, and ferns, and flowers had converted into a veritable fairy-like bower, while small occasional tables laden with rare specimens of foreign art—most of them being mementoes of Lord Willoughby’s travels—furnished an abundant source of interest to those whose tastes lay in that direction.

“ I am quite ready to admit that ; ” said Laura Vaughan in answer to my last ambiguous remark, “ although I cannot say

I understand what the circumstances are in the present case. Having been brought up, however, to regard you as a prodigy of wisdom," she went on, with a return to her old playful, half mocking manner, "and look upon everything you say or do with the profoundest respect, I am, of course, bound to believe that you have some wise, though inscrutable reason, for acting, on this, and other late occasions, with such apparent inconsistency."

"Yes, that's right," I exclaimed, quickly, falling in with her mood, "do at any rate give me credit for meaning well."

"Meaning well!" she dubiously repeated, while a sober smile rippled over her lips, "that was not quite what I said."

"I'll tell you all about my own stupid blunders one day," I observed, significantly, "and ask you to forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive," she answered, with a little flash of spirit.

"And in the meantime," I continued, quietly ignoring this energetic disclaimer, "I want you to be kind to me."

“Kind?” she echoed, almost as if she fancied she must have mistaken the word.

“Yes, my life is a very isolated one, you know,” I went on, seriously, “without a single relation to fall back upon, and very few friends I care about sufficiently to value their good opinion, or dream of admitting them into my own confidence on any purely personal matter. But it is so different with you and your father! it seems like home to be with you; and I cannot tell you how glad it makes me to think of your taking ever so small an amount of interest in my movements.”

“You surely must know that papa takes the greatest interest in your welfare,” remarked my companion, in a half whisper.

“Ah, yes! shall I ever forget his kindness!” I heartily responded; and then I went on for a short time longer on the same subject, until I had completely succeeded in breaking down the line of demarcation which had of late seemed to separate us, and established, in its place, a sort of confidential relationship, such as would satisfy her, on one point at least, and do away, to a certain

extent, with the erroneous impression which my own late conduct had produced upon her sensitive mind, with regard to my apparently altered feelings towards herself.

I plainly perceived that the thing of things which had vexed her, was the lack of confidence, with which I had for some time past treated her, the studious way in which I had held aloof, whenever I could do so without appearing uncourteous, and the commonplace subjects on which I had chosen to speak whenever I had been unavoidably thrown into her society.

It was all so different to what it had formerly been, when I told her every thought which was passing in my mind, having no secret to conceal ; for my boyish admiration for her was as well understood by the object of it as by myself, and quite accepted as a thing of course ; only a right and proper feeling on my part, and not for a moment to be found fault with or disputed.

The change, therefore, *must*—putting love entirely out of sight—have seemed very strange and perplexing, to a frank, sym-

pathetic, and sensitively-dispositioned girl like Laura Vaughan. She was so entirely free from stiffness or reserve herself; being on the contrary of rather a demonstrative temperament, and as she was, of course, entirely ignorant of the existence of that strong impetuous tide of passionate affection which stirred my own heart, and made it so difficult—well-nigh impossible, indeed—for me to keep back all outward manifestation of it if thrown too frequently into her society, it was only natural that she should finally conclude that I no longer derived the same pleasure from it as I had formerly done, and that she was in point of fact, if not exactly superseded, at least unappreciated, and uncared for, by the one of all others who had been wont to look upon her in so totally different, and more complimentary a light.

Now, my first task was to endeavour to undo the mischief I had so unwittingly wrought, and, happily for the success of my efforts, the character I had to deal with was as a rule singularly free from anything like doubt or suspicion; so that when I had once

persuaded her into the belief that, whatever my past conduct may have meant, I was at all events perfectly sincere in now wishing to cultivate her acquaintance, and try as far as I possibly could to render myself agreeable to her, she seemed quite willing to condone the past, and shake off that chill constrained manner which her self respect and wounded feelings had probably impelled her to assume, by way of masking her real sentiments, and preventing me from knowing how hurt and mortified she had been at my seeming neglect.

I think Mr. Darringford had fully intended to make a further attempt that same night to induce Miss Vaughan to give a more favourable answer than her former ones had been to his own suit; but my unlooked-for intervention forced him to alter his plans, and put off repeating the all important question until he should have some other and more propitious opportunity.

His face wore a gloomy ill-used expression, as he came forward just as we were in the act of taking our departure, and put out his

hand with rather a haughty movement, as if to relieve me from the charge of Laura's fur cloak which happened to be hanging on my arm ; but without appearing to notice the action, I quietly proceeded to put the snowy wrap carefully around her, and then after an instant's pause, during which I exchanged a rapid glance with her, I stepped back, and allowed my rival to [conduct her to the carriage, Mr. Vaughan and myself following close behind.

For this little act of generosity, I received a condescendingly gracious smile, which would probably have been quickly transformed into something else had Mr. Darrington possessed the gift of looking into my heart, and detected the motive which had actuated me in thus according him the trifling privilege he sought.

He said something in a low tone to her about "hoping to see her again soon," from which I gathered that he intended to take advantage of the very first opportunity which should be afforded him for carrying out the little programme which I had been the means

of preventing him from accomplishing that night.

For my own part I felt perfectly satisfied with the progress I had made towards bringing about a mutually good understanding between Laura Vaughan and myself. I had succeeded most completely in convincing her, I thought, that although my past conduct might have been slightly inconsistent and erratic, I yet had been guiltless of any intentional unkindness or neglect; and this was a great step gained, as she was about the last person in the world to resent a seeming injury, when she once had reason to suppose that it was merely the result of some misapprehension or inadvertence.

She probably took it for granted that the engrossing nature of my legal pursuits might partially account for the unusual reserve and unsociability which had of late characterised me; and the very fact of my having returned as it were to my allegiance to herself just at the time when I had made arrangements for getting a few weeks' leave of absence from Mr. Willoughby's chambers, for the purpose

of revisiting the old Saltsea scenes, would naturally serve to strengthen her in this opinion, and incline her to acquit me of anything more culpable than an undue absorption in the duties of my new calling.

I tried at this particular juncture, to follow Mr. Vaughan's kind and considerate advice, and forget as far as I possibly could, my own personal inferiority, and those numerous deficiencies in point of wealth and social standing and position of which I was so keenly sensitive.

If *he* was satisfied, I reminded myself, when the humiliating consciousness of the vast gulf which separated us in the eyes of others at least (although *he* in his partiality and good-nature might indulgently overlook the fact) would unpleasantly obtrude itself before my proud and independent spirit, surely I need not fret and worry about it! and though I had no distinguished or legitimate name to offer the girl I loved, in place of her own, and no fortune to lay down at her feet, I had at all events the power of being able to work for her, and a not far

distant prospect of realising a very fair income by the exercise of those peculiar talents which had doubtless been intrusted to me for the purpose.

Still, to a disposition like mine, it certainly *was* mortifying to feel that I had literally nothing to offer, except myself! and I may perhaps be excused if the thought of my present relief and prospective happiness was occasionally tempered by regret at not having it in my power to come forward on more equal terms, especially after hearing from Mr. Vaughan that not only would his daughter be handsomely provided for at his death, but she would also on her marriage be entitled to a considerable sum of money, which had originally belonged to her mother, and over which he had himself no control.

It strangely happened, however, that my own position, so far as pecuniary matters went, was suddenly changed, and that in the most startling and unlooked-for manner.

The very day before that which Mr. Vaughan had fixed for returning to Saltsea, I received a very extraordinary communica-

tion from a firm of London solicitors, briefly informing me that, by applying to a well-known bank in the city, I should find that the sum of thirty thousand pounds had been deposited there some few days previously in my name.

“We beg to mention,” so ended the short concise letter, “that this sum of thirty thousand pounds belongs entirely and exclusively to yourself, having been left you by one of our late clients, whose name we are not at liberty to divulge.”

The first effect which this astounding news had upon me was to fill me with a sense of the most profound mental perplexity and perturbation.

What did it all mean? I excitedly asked myself; could it indeed be *true*? or was I the victim of some gross delusion; a clumsy, though probably unintentional blunder, committed by those matter-of-fact solicitors, who wrote in such a curt decided tone, just as if it was the most simple and every-day occurrence for a man to find himself suddenly, and without a moment's warning, the fortunate

possessor of thirty thousand pounds ! without knowing from whence it came, or by whom it was given : the peculiar circumstances under which it had been left to me ; whether as an act of simple justice, by way of making tardy reparation for some unacknowledged wrong, or a spontaneous freak of pure generosity on the part of this unknown testator, who so evidently wished to keep me in ignorance as to his personal identity, on the one hand, and the motives which had influenced him on the other, in thus adopting measures for rendering me practically independent for the future, of the aid and assistance of anyone else.

As soon as the first shock of intense surprise and bewilderment had in some degree subsided, and I was able to consider the matter with comparative calmness, my thoughts naturally reverted to the mysterious stranger who had so singularly excited my curiosity, and unsettled my mind, just before I started for India, and who had been in his turn so deeply interested in my own history.

That some sort of tie existed between us I could not possibly doubt. The mere fact of his having in his possession a ring so exact a fac-simile, in every particular, to that which had belonged to my poor mother, would of itself have been quite enough to set my mind at rest on this one point, without the corroborative testimony of other evidence; and although I could not quite bring myself to accept Edmund Stafford's view of the case, and take it for granted that the relationship we bore each other was nothing less than that of father and son, I yet felt instinctively conscious that we *were* connected, though in what measure or degree I should have found some difficulty in defining.

It never occurred to me to go and consult Mr. Vaughan as to the steps I ought to take in this fresh crisis in my personal experience.

I felt indeed that it was a matter for my own private judgment; and it would only have been placing him in an awkward and embarrassing position, and throwing a far greater weight of responsibility upon his

shoulders than I had any right to inflict on him, were I to expect him to give an opinion on a subject beset with so much present difficulty, and from which might possibly spring certain future consequences.

And here I must confess that the idea of thus receiving money from one who, while he lived, had never done anything for me, was very repugnant to me; for although he had been probably ignorant of my existence until that memorable day when we had for the first and last time met face-to-face, he might, had he been so inclined, have found opportunities enough for following up the discovery he had then made, and ascertaining from Mr. Whitworth in what way he could be of use to me.

As however, he had done nothing of the kind, but seemed rather, judging from his silence, to wish to leave me to my own devices without taking any pains to improve my somewhat doubtful prospects, I could scarcely be expected to appreciate this posthumous generosity, all unaccompanied as it was by even the faintest glimmer of hope to

encourage me to look forward ever so distantly to the time when the mystery of my parentage should be cleared up, and I should have the satisfaction of knowing what my rightful name really was ; a point which I had always been the most eagerly anxious about ; money being, in my opinion, quite a secondary consideration when compared to the all important question of my own personal identity.

I had sufficient common sense, however, to understand that if this unexpected legacy should turn out a genuine *bonâ-fide* thing, and if the conditions attached to it were such as I could conscientiously accept, it would certainly be of immense service to me at that particular juncture, by helping to remove one of the most serious impediments (barring of course birth), which had hitherto stood in the way of my much-to-be-desired connection with the Vaughan family.

I resolved therefore that I would lose no time in instituting full inquiries on the subject ; and in accordance with this design I put the solicitors' letter in my pocket, hastily

seized my hat, and went in the first place to pay a visit to the bank.

Asking to see one of the principal partners on important business, I was, after being kept waiting for about twenty minutes, shown into his private room ; whereupon—a few common words of civility having been exchanged—I silently handed him the solicitors' letter.

He read it carefully over, and then smilingly returned it, saying questioningly :

“Is there any suggestion you would wish to make as to the best mode of investing——”

“Thanks, no ;” I somewhat unceremoniously interrupted, “I am not thinking of that at present, but if you will kindly let me know just how this money got into your hands, I shall be infinitely obliged to you.”

“Oh, certainly,” he responded very courteously, but with an air of surprise, “any information I can give you, you are of course most welcome to.”

Thus saying he left me, and nearly five minutes elapsed before he again returned,

bearing in his hand a slip of paper, which he presented to me, with the polite remark :

“You will find noted down on this, the only particulars with which we are ourselves acquainted.”

“Which amounts to literally nothing !” I disappointedly made answer, as soon as I had rapidly glanced my eye over it, and saw that it merely contained a repetition of that with which I had already been made acquainted.

“Don’t you think,” reflectively observed my obliging companion, “that as this money was paid into the bank by these very solicitors, *they* are the proper persons to apply to for any further explanation you may require ?”

“I’m afraid I shall not get much out of them,” I soliloquised, as I rose from my seat, replaced their letter in my pocket, and prepared to depart. “I was greatly in hopes,” I added, directing a keen searching glance at the good-natured banker, a little latent suspicion having arisen in my mind with regard to his veracity, “that you might have

been able to tell me the name of the person to whom this money originally belonged."

"Upon my word, no! I have not the slightest suspicion," he answered, in a voice which instantly convinced me that I had done him injustice, in having for one moment harboured the uncharitable thought that he probably knew more than he cared to say on this, so far as I was personally concerned, deeply interesting subject.

CHAPTER VIII.

MESSRS. SLOW AND SWIFT.

“There’s no art,
To find the mind’s construction in the face ;
He was a gentleman on whom I built,
An absolute trust.”

“Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon him.”

“He that wants money, means, and content, is without three good friends.”

HAVING thus signally failed in eliciting anything in the shape of information at the bank, my next step was to drive off to Messrs. Slow and Swift’s office, upon the very remote chance of being able to induce them to disclose the name and social standing of the client who had, by their own showing, left me this unexpected legacy.

Both the partners were happily in, but I had to wait nearly three quarters of an hour before seeing them, as they were engaged on important business—so I was informed by a consequential clerk, and could not, on any account, be disturbed.

When I was at length ushered into their joint presence, I glanced from one to the other with an eager anxious gaze, in order to discover in that one brief moment the style of men with whom I had to deal.

My investigation was not, so far, favourable, inasmuch as I could plainly read on both faces a fixed and resolved expression, from which I conjectured that, however widely their ideas might differ on some subjects, they were at least united in their determination to keep their own, or rather their late client's, counsel, and that all the arguments I might bring forward on the opposite side would be entirely wasted, and of no avail whatever, in getting them to gratify my own most natural curiosity on so purely personal a subject, or clear up, ever so partially, the mystery which still lay like

an incubus upon my chafed and excited spirit.

Mr. Slow was the first to speak. He was tall, thin, and middle-aged ; with sharp black eyes, and a quick energetic manner, a bland smile, and a soft insinuating voice, his partner being, on the contrary, despite his name, a silent and taciturn man, with a grave reflective countenance, slow and deliberative in his movements, short and abrupt in his mode of expressing himself, whenever he did condescend to give utterance to an opinion, and an air about him which, rightly or wrongly, gave one the impression that every word he uttered was the result of grave and mature consideration, and that, under no circumstances whatever, would he be guilty of talking for mere talking's sake, or performing the most trifling and unimportant action without having reflected well on the consequences, and satisfied himself as to its being the right and proper thing to do.

“ Of course you have received our letter ?” blandly observed Mr. Slow, his keen black

eyes travelling investigatively over my countenance as he spoke.

“Yes, that is the reason of my being here,” I replied, assuming as calm and composed a tone as I could; “I naturally concluded from it that you are acquainted with a certain passage in my own little history, which I would give much to learn; and I thought, therefore, that you might have no objection—your client being dead—to disclose a secret which I can quite understand that you might otherwise have felt yourselves bound to keep.”

“But, my dear sir—pardon me for saying so,” briskly observed Mr. Slow—“but does it not strike you that your premises are untenable? you rush too rapidly to a conclusion; you have no substantial grounds for alleging that any such secret actually exists.”

“Indeed you are mistaken,” I quietly retorted; “to my own mind, at least, the inferences are perfectly conclusive. Besides,” I added, significantly, “the very fact of this money having been left me in such a peculiar

and mysterious manner speaks for itself. A man does not, as a rule, under ordinary circumstances, bequeath to another man, whom he has probably never even seen more than once during the whole course of his life"—here I glanced keenly at him—"so large a sum as thirty thousand pounds, without having some specially strong reason for doing so."

"Even admitting that," replied the astute solicitor, without betraying the slightest change of countenance, "you will, I am sure, confess that those reasons which often appear the most clear and cogent to ourselves, would, when presented to the eyes of others, assume quite a different aspect. It does not, therefore, follow, that because our late client chose to single you out in this flattering manner, and desire to leave you an anonymous token of his respect and esteem, he must necessarily have possessed the clue to your own personal history."

"Excuse me, but I know better," I said, rather impatiently; "shall I ever forget his look and manner the only time I ever saw

him, and the obstinate way in which he refused to furnish me with his name and address, to say nothing of the hint he gave me, that one day it would turn out an advantage to myself, our having thus met."

"Is there not just a possibility that the gentleman to whom you refer had no connection whatever with our late client?" insinuated Mr. Slow.

"I scarcely think you need ask the question," I answered, somewhat haughtily, for this evasive conduct on the part of one who so evidently comprehended the exact state of affairs struck me very unfavourably ; "I am not quite a fool."

"Far from it—I should say!" politely emphasized Mr. Slow, while his hitherto silent partner, after fumbling in his waistcoat pocket for a minute or two with the absent air of a man who is looking for nothing in particular, brought forth a gold-mounted double eye-glass, which he proceeded, with the utmost deliberation, to adjust on his nose, after which, he set himself to the task of diligently studying my general appearance.

“Just put yourself in my place for a minute,” I exclaimed, turning suddenly round upon him, and addressing *him* for the first time, instead of his more loquacious and energetic partner, “would *you* not be anxious to discover something about your birth and parentage?”

“Most certainly I should,” he responded, after an instant’s pause; “but to tell you the honest truth, we are not at liberty to reveal anything that you do not already know. Our lips are tied—is it not so, Mr. Slow?” appealing to the other.

“Exactly,” was the prompt endorsement; “and it is a rule of our firm never, under any circumstances, to betray a trust, or——”

“Why, then, did you not go upon this principle at first?” I demanded somewhat reproachfully; “instead of trying to make me believe that my surmises were incorrect?”

“Because we do not care in a general way to make these kinds of admission,” was the unexpected explanation. “It is not always safe to allow people to take too much for granted; and if you had been another style

of character, we should have let you go away under quite a different impression to that which you at present have."

"What has my character to say to it?" I inquired, in unfeigned amazement.

"Simply this," laughed Mr. Slow: "while you and I have been talking, he," nodding his head in the direction of his gravely attentive partner, "has been appraising your mental and moral worth. Now do you understand?" and he glanced meaningly at me.

"Indeed, no!" I truthfully made answer. "I'm not a whit wiser than before."

"Well, in plain matter-of-fact language, Mr. Swift is the keenest and most accurate delineator of character I ever met with. In fact, I never knew him make a mistake! Just give him five minutes of any man's society, and he can tell you precisely how far that man is to be trusted, or whether indeed he is to be trusted at all; and when I once get the cue from him, I know exactly where I stand, and am ready for any emergency."

"A truly marvellous gift," I observed,

gazing at the reputed possessor of it with a kind of wondering respect. "I suppose, then," I added presently, with a sudden thought, "I ought to feel myself decidedly complimented, in having been so far fortunate as to impress him with the idea that, up to a certain point at least, I am to be trusted."

'Yes, indeed,' heartily responded Mr. Slow; "I saw in a moment, from what he said, and the way he said it, that he thought very highly of you; and if you will allow me upon the strength of this little parenthesis," he went on, once more reverting to my own affairs, "to offer you a few words of gratuitous advice, I shall take it as a personal favour."

"You want, I suppose, to persuade me into the belief that in this as well as other cases, ignorance is bliss?" I exclaimed, with rather a melancholy smile.

"Not exactly," he quickly returned; "but I think by representing to you the numberless and insuperable difficulties which stand in the way of the accomplishment of your object, and the little tangible benefit which

would ever accrue to yourself"—these words were spoken very slowly and significantly—"even if you did ultimately succeed in finding out what you want, you will agree with Mr. Swift and myself in considering that it is far wiser and better in every way to allow matters to remain in their present state."

"*Ought* I to do this, I wonder, in justice to others?" I murmured, more to myself than my companions.

"What others?" was the quick inquiry.

"Well, there is the future to be considered," I said, in a voice of semi-embarrassment. "I am hoping before long to marry; and—in fact, it's not pleasant to offer a girl a name which doesn't properly speaking belong to you."

"I should not mind that in the very least," encouragingly declared Mr. Slow; "we are told that 'use is second nature,' and it would, I should think, cause far more surprise to your friends if you were all at once to make a change in this respect, than by your continuing to bear the same name as that by which they have always known you."

I could not help privately acknowledging that there was a good deal of truth in this remark, as the greater part of my acquaintances were of course quite ignorant of my early history, and it would, therefore, so far at any rate as they were concerned, occasion a great deal of surprise and useless gossip, if any such alteration as that to which he referred *did* take place after the many years during which I had been, or seemed to be, satisfied with the name chosen for me by my kind friend and self-constituted guardian, Mr. Joyce.

“There’s one other question I should like to ask before I go,” I said, rising from my seat a few minutes later, by way of showing them that I was mindful of the value of their time, and did not wish to trespass too long upon their joint attention—“are you at liberty to mention the relationship which existed between your client and myself? or——”

“Indeed, I am sorry to say we are *not*,” was the evidently sincere reply, “both of us being bound—irrevocably bound—to maintain the strictest silence on *this subject*, no

less than the others; and we could not, without loss of honour, go back from our word."

"I suppose there can be no objection to your telling me whether I shall, by appropriating this money, be doing anyone else an injury by depriving them——"

"Oh yes, we can satisfy you most convincingly on that point!" unhesitatingly interposed Mr. Slow. "There is not a single living person who could possibly dispute your right to it; it belongs entirely and exclusively to yourself, and if you were foolish enough to refuse it, it would remain just where it is—lying quite idle, and doing good to no one."

"Under the circumstances, then, I think I shall take possession of it," I said, after a brief period of thoughtful silence.

"It will certainly be your wisest plan," was the apparently satisfied rejoinder, "and I hope"—this was smilingly added, as a polite after-thought—"you may find it of some little use to you."

"Thank you, I have no doubt I shall," I

candidly admitted, "though I must confess, if I had had my choice, I would much rather have—— but," checking myself, "what is the use of harking back upon the old tune? What *is* to be, must be, I suppose; and if I am to remain a mystery all my life, why, I must just put up with it."

Thus saying, I held out my hand to Mr. Slow, and after he had shaken it with marked cordiality, I turned towards his more silent partner for the purpose of bidding him also a courteous good-day, when, greatly to my astonishment, he observed, in a tone of unmistakable kindness:

"Will you allow me, on behalf of my partner and myself, to assure you that we both sympathise most thoroughly with you in all that you have said, and regret extremely that we can be of no practical assistance to you, so far as setting your mind at rest is concerned with regard to the vexed question of your identity."

"Thank you," I replied, looking at him with an appreciative smile; "where a point of honour is concerned, I could not of course

expect you to act otherwise than you are now doing."

"No," he assented, in slow, grave, pondering tones, "it is a case in which much is involved, and many interests bound up; and one part of the story could not possibly be told without the other. I think, therefore, speaking truly and conscientiously"—judging indeed from the extreme deliberation with which he pronounced this opinion, it would almost seem as if every word was being carefully weighed before spoken—"the determination you have come to is one on which you ought to be congratulated; for to take another view of the case, which has not yet occurred, I believe, either to you or Mr. Slow, the wishes of the dead ought to be respected, especially when they can do no harm to any one, but rather good."

"Very well, I shall take your word for it that such is the case in the present instance," I quickly responded, being very much struck by the apparent earnestness and sincerity of his manner. "Nothing therefore now remains, except for me, to thank you very

much for the kind courtesy with which you have acted towards me, and to relieve you at last of the inconvenience of my presence."

"Pray do not mention it," was the smiling response, "we shall always be most happy to be of use to you, and hope you will not hesitate to let us know if there is any way in which we can serve you—" and—*not* Mr. Slow, but—Mr. Swift came forward, opened the door for me, and escorted me with the utmost politeness through the outer office, where a small army of copying clerks were hard at work—or had the appearance of being so—and, in spite of my remonstrances, even descended a short flight of stairs with me, for the purpose of pointing out a few uneven steps which were somewhat dangerous, he informed me, to the uninitiated foot of a stranger.

Then he once more put out his hand, grasped mine with a warmth and friendliness of manner such as I could scarcely have expected to receive from one of whose very existence I had, until that day, been unaware; after which, he slowly retraced his

way to his own sanctum, while I went to execute a few trifling commissions for Mrs. Dalton, who had been invited to accompany us on the morrow to Saltsea.

I never knew exactly what made Mr. Vaughan ask her to visit himself and his daughter at that particular time. It is just possible that he may have considered it advisable, for the sake of propriety that Laura should have the support of her aunt during my own stay at the vicarage; or—what I think is more probable—Mrs. Dalton may herself have suggested the idea, as she was not, as a rule, backward in that sort of thing, being apt, as we have already seen, to express her opinions pretty freely, whether they were asked or not, and not particularly pleased if she found her suggestions and spontaneously offered advice in danger of being disregarded.

At present, however, she appeared at her very best, being evidently on excellent terms just then both with herself and the rest of the world. She was always particularly gracious in her manner towards me, although

I had, on some few late occasions, been conscious of treating her with far less ceremony and respect than I had at first done, so chafed and irritated was I by the constant allusions she still continued to make to Mr. Darrington, and the hopeless nature of his suit ; a theme not exactly calculated to improve my temper, or add to my general stock of patience.

Fortunately, however, she did not seem to notice, much less to resent, my lack of sympathy with her in this one—to me—objectionable topic, which she was at all times and seasons introducing, until I was perfectly nauseated with the poor unfortunate young man's name ; and it was an infinite relief to me when I discovered that he had received his *congé* in good earnest at last—accepted his fate as stoically as could, under the circumstances, have been expected, and joined some friends who were just setting off on a yachting expedition to the Mediterranean.

Not that even then Mrs. Dalton ceased to take an interest in him—far from it ! Con-

stantly she would bring forward his name, and always in low hushed tones, just as if he had been the victim of some terrible misfortune; and that she, and she only, could rightly estimate the pain he suffered, and the trial which probably awaited him in the lonely and isolated life he would from henceforth be compelled to lead.

But not content with this, she took upon herself to remind us of the many dangers he might be supposed to encounter before we should again have an opportunity of seeing him, sometimes relating, 'for our mutual benefit, various harrowing details connected with the way in which other young men had comported themselves after being treated in a similar manner to that in which Laura had treated him.

Some, according to Mrs. Dalton's showing, had, while smarting under the disappointment of an unrequited affection, given way to fits of depression, which had finally ended in their terminating their own existence; *others* had deteriorated in point of conduct and morals; while others again, had, she averred,

even gone the length of committing the most unheard-of and atrocious crimes ; all being more or less the result of the same thing.

I was rather in hopes that when we went to Saltsea she would forget poor Mr. Darrington, and his disappointed expectations—but no ! every time we found ourselves within a mile of Darrington Hall she would recommence afresh to sigh over the cruel necessity which had obliged him to leave his beautiful house and grounds to the charge of servants, and made him—to use her own graphic though slightly exaggerated language — instead of a blessing to the neighbourhood, as he ought to, and probably would have been under happier circumstances, a wanderer upon the face of the earth !

As a rule her lamentations on this head merely had the effect of exciting her niece's amusement ; but there were times when the latter was really vexed and annoyed ; seeing which, I at length made up my mind that I would, in vulgar parlance, take the bull by the horns, and try if I could not enlist Mrs. Dalton's sympathies in another direction.

I had studied her character a good deal of late, and finally arrived at the conclusion that, in spite of her worldliness and ambition, she was, on the whole, kind and good-natured, and that nothing pleased her better than being made the repository of other people's confidences.

It was partly this fact which had made her, in the first place, so warm a partisan of Mr. Darringford. He had entrusted her with the secret of his hopeless attachment for her niece, begged her to use her own influence with father and daughter on his behalf, and flattered her into the belief that her own aid and co-operation in the matter would be most invaluable to him, converting her forthwith into a firm and faithful ally, and making her never weary of sounding his praises, and trying in other ways to further his plans for him.

Now, however, that he had received his final dismissal, and she could not, even by the aid of the most sanguine imagination, cherish the faintest of hopes that he would ever become Laura's husband, there was just

a chance, I fancied, that by appealing to the generous side of her character, I might be able to induce her to look with a favourable eye upon my own suit; in which case she would, I was well aware, soon cease to persecute her niece on account of the absent Mr. Darringford.

One afternoon I was afforded the very opportunity I desired for obtaining a little private conversation with her, and I lost no time in taking advantage of it.

CHAPTER IX.

ANOTHER LINK IN MYSTERY'S CHAIN.

"The cunning workman never doth refuse
The meanest tool that he may chance to use."

"The soul of music slumbers in the shell
Till waked and kindled by the master's spell
And feeling hearts—touch them but rightly—pour
A thousand melodies unheard before."

LAURA had received a note, asking her to visit a certain invalid lady who occupied a charming country residence about a mile off, and having accompanied her to the door of her friend's house, and arranged to call for her again in a couple of hours' time, I retraced my own footsteps to the vicarage, where I found, as I had expected, Mrs. Dalton sitting alone in the drawing-room.

I waited for a minute of two, to see whether she would bring Miss Vaughan's name on the tapis, but finding that she seemed just then more interested in canvassing the weather, which showed signs of an approaching change, I plunged boldly into my subject, by saying, in a low confidential tone :

"I know you can be trusted, Mrs. Dalton, so I am going to tell you a secret."

"A secret?" she repeated, turning delightedly towards me, and bestowing on me a most gracious and encouraging smile ; "what is it about?"

"Well, I'm dreadfully afraid you will be angry—or at any rate disappointed," I said, putting on a half deprecating expression, "but really I can't help it, and it's better, after all, that you should know the truth."

"Why, what is it all about?" she laughingly demanded ; "judging from your grave face, it must be something serious."

"You are quite right; it *is* a serious matter," I explained, slowly and significantly ; "it refers to your niece."

“To Laura !” she cried, rather a mystified expression coming to her face.

“Yes ; I suppose it never occurred to you,” I went on meaningly, “that *I* should have the presumption to fall in love with her ?”

“You ?” she exclaimed, lifting up her hands in amazement ; “is it possible ?”

“Indeed, it is nothing more or less than the truth,” I solemnly assured her, “though I have, up to the present time, refrained from letting *her* know——”

“Thank God for that !” was the fervent aspiration ; “for you must be well aware, my dear boy,” she went on, laying her hand impressively upon my arm, and speaking in the soothing tone one uses in addressing a petted child who expresses a wish to possess something or other which is entirely beyond his reach, “that it would never do—never !” and she set her lips firmly together, and looked at me with a sort of pitying expression, mingled with the profoundest astonishment and concern.

“I was afraid you would say that,” I answered, “and I am quite ready to admit

that in everything except my deep devoted love I am not worthy of her. No one could be more conscious of the fact than myself."

"Poor fellow ! I really *am* sorry for you," was her next compassionate remark—and I firmly believe she was. "Who could have supposed," she continued, after a moment's thought, more apparently to herself than me, "that such an unfortunate *contretemps* as *this* would ever occur ?"

"And yet, after all, it was only natural," I excusingly reminded her.

"Natural — well, perhaps it may have been," she reluctantly assented, "but somehow the idea never occurred to me. When I first saw you, it is true," she frankly amended, "I *did* feel a little uncomfortable at the thought of your having the *entrée* to my brother-in-law's house ; but your own grave and sedate manner, and the perfect propriety with which you conducted yourself towards his daughter, soon convinced me that there was no danger whatever to be apprehended from your visits. Now, however, I shall

always blame myself for having been so easily deceived."

"There is no need for you to do that," I hastily exclaimed, "the mischief—if mischief it is—was wrought years before I ever had the pleasure of meeting yourself."

"Really?" she ejaculated, in a half-startled voice, "that only serves to complicate matters."

"My love for your niece," I went on, instinctively feeling that the wisest course I could pursue, would be to candidly tell her the plain truth, "has grown with my growth, and strengthened with my strength, until it seems to have become a part of my very nature; a great and moving principle, which will never cease to exist so long as my own life and being shall be continued to me."

"Dear me! you seem terribly in earnest," replied Mrs. Dalton, looking more and more distressed and perturbed; "but *do*, I beg of you, consider the matter well before you speak to Laura. I am *sure*," she added, insinuatingly, "you must be anxious to study her welfare—loving her as you do—rather than your own."

I bent my head with a slight gesture of assent, and she proceeded more briskly :

“ Personally, I don’t for a moment object to you ”—this was evidently said with the good-natured desire to make the pill she intended to administer more palatable than it might otherwise have been—“ but we *must* consider ways and means, you know.”

“ No doubt,” I acquiesced, as she paused and gazed interrogatively at me.

“ Well, if you will excuse my plain speaking,” she observed, with a conclusive shake of the head, “ I must say that, however much I may like and respect you *as a man*, I really cannot look upon you, so far, at any rate, as your worldly prospects are concerned, as a suitable and proper match for Laura.”

“ I have already acknowledged as much myself,” I reminded her.

“ There is your profession, of course,” she went on reflectively, “ but——”

“ And thirty thousand pounds to begin with,” I put in eagerly, “ if that is worth mentioning, besides a small legacy left to me by Sir Stafford Stafford, and which

his son wants to double, only I won't let him."

"You don't mean to tell me you have got thirty thousand pounds of your own?" cried Mrs. Dalton, in evident amazement.

"Yes; would you care to hear how it came into my hands?" I asked, with a quiet smile, knowing full well that her woman's curiosity would instantly incline her to answer in the affirmative.

"Of course I should!" was the unhesitating rejoinder.

"It is quite a secret, you know," I remarked, by way of enhancing its value. "I have not mentioned it to a single person—not even to Mr. Vaughan," I added, significantly.

And then I briefly narrated the little story. She was already acquainted with my early history; otherwise I might not have been quite so ready to explain matters to her.

She listened with the utmost interest and attention to all I had to say; and when I had finished, remarked, in a tone which showed that her opinion of me had undergone a slight change since last she spoke:

“Really it is quite a little romance! and I should not be at all surprised”—this was said with a look and voice of the greatest respect—“if you were to turn out a person of importance after all!”

“Do you think, then,” I asked, trying hard to suppress a smile, “that I might venture upon the strength of it to come forward as a suitor for your niece’s hand?”

“Upon my word I don’t see any particular objection to your doing so!” she thoughtfully replied, “for as you very sensibly observed just now, thirty thousand pounds is something to begin with, and——”

“You do not think there was any harm in my taking possession of the money, do you?” I asked her, feeling curious to hear what she would say.

“Harm!” she energetically repeated, “I should think not, indeed! Depend upon it, it’s your very own,” she added sagaciously, “and I dare say at this very moment you are being cheated out of your rightful inheritance by some unprincipled person who ought to be forcibly ejected. If I were you,” she

went on impressively, "I would set the detectives to work, and there's no saying what important discoveries they may make."

Of course, I had not the most remote idea of following her sage advice; but I was too thoroughly satisfied with the turn things had taken to wish to damp her ardour. So I contented myself with making some ambiguous rejoinder, and she forthwith began to sketch out various little programmes for me to follow, in order to obtain what she summed up under the comprehensive term of "my rights."

It needed very little penetration to discover that a vast change had suddenly come over her with regard to me. Instead of looking upon me as a sort of cipher, a tame cat, who might be allowed to roam about the house at pleasure, without the fear of his doing any harm to anyone, or a good-tempered Newfoundland dog, conveniently able to fetch and carry, and otherwise be made useful, I had all at once risen in her estimation to the level of at least a nobleman in disguise, with any amount of wealth in the

background, merely waiting for me to lay claim to.

The very mystery which at present enshrouded me only added to her newly awakened interest, by giving scope to her imaginative powers, and enabling her to weave all kinds of ridiculous and far-fetched fancies out of the very scanty material with which I had so unexpectedly furnished her.

Practically, so far as her good wishes were concerned, the field was won, I triumphantly told myself at the end of the interview; and from thenceforth I had no fear of her continuing to worry us about Mr. Darrington, as she had hitherto persisted in doing.

She would have something else to engage her attention now, and loving as she did to arrange the affairs of other people for them, she would probably very soon be as anxious about the progress of my own suit as I was myself.

"Now I must go and fetch Laura!" I exclaimed, starting up at last; "I had no idea it was so late, which shows how quickly the time passes"—I added politely—"when

one has the privilege of confiding one's secrets to a kind and sympathising friend."

"I am glad you found it so," she answered, accepting the compliment quite naturally, and with a pleased and gratified smile.

I went away, therefore, feeling comfortably conscious that I had left a favourable impression behind me ; and I never had cause to regret having entrusted her with this partial confidence.

The following morning, when we were all seated at breakfast, Mr. Vaughan astonished me by saying rather abruptly :

"It has just occurred to me, Charlie, that, without intending it, I have kept back rather an important piece of information from you. I can't think what made me forget to tell you before, though at the time it happened I purposely omitted to mention it, as I fancied it would only unsettle you."

"What is it?" I inquired, wondering at the unwonted seriousness of his manner.

"Well, it's simply this," he explained, in a grave, museful tone, "very soon after you had started for India, I happened to receive a

letter from a most respectable Middlebury tradesman, requesting my permission to enclose your mother's grave in the old churchyard——"

"Is it possible?" I eagerly interrupted, while Mrs. Dalton looked at me with a mysteriously confidential expression, as if to remind me of her own hopeful prophesy with regard to my future.

"He said he had been requested by a gentleman whose name he did not know," continued Mr. Vaughan, after an instant's pause, "to write to me on the subject, this gentleman having instructed him to make arrangements for having the ground in which she lay enclosed by a handsome railing, within which a plain but costly monument was to be erected, bearing nothing, however, in the way of inscription save the one word,

" ' RESURGAM. ' "

"And what did you do?" I asked breathlessly.

"Of course I instantly accorded the desired

permission, and quickly followed it up by paying a visit to the before-mentioned tradesman, for the purpose of ascertaining from him all the particulars he knew with regard to this mysterious stranger, who would, I strongly suspected, turn out to be the very same whom you had yourself met so recently."

"I don't suppose you discovered much?" I thoughtfully remarked.

"You are right there," was the significant reply; "the information I received from Mr. Mason was none of the clearest. He could not even describe the appearance of the stranger, as it had been quite dusk, he said, when he saw him; and he was moreover muffled up to that extent, that he very much doubted whether he would be able to recognise him in the event of their ever again meeting. The only thing I did discover was the name of a London firm of solicitors to whom Mr. Mason had been referred for future instructions, and to them I applied in person, as they might, I thought, for a consideration, be induced to clear up certain knotty points for you, and throw at least

some faint glimmer of light upon this mysterious stranger's late conduct. As might have been expected, however, I found them as close as wax, and from that day to this I have heard no more on the subject."

"Do you happen to remember the name of these solicitors?" I asked.

"Let me see—it was rather an odd name," mused the vicar, as he began reflectively to stroke his chin; "two opposites, as far as I recollect, Strong and Weak, or——"

"Was it Slow and Swift?" I suggested.

"The very same; I thought it such an extraordinary idea for the two names to be so closely united."

"Are those the same solicitors you told me about, yesterday?" demanded Mrs. Dalton, in a low aside, as I passed her a cup of coffee.

I bent my head assentingly, whereupon she muttered, distrustfully:

"I thought so! it's all of a piece!—a regular conspiracy to defraud you out of your rights."

“What is, Aunt Jane?” asked Laura, from her place at the top of the table.

“She is only kindly extending her protection towards me,” I hastily explained, after directing rather a meaning glance at the elder lady, intended to show that I fully expected her to keep my secret, “by expressing her unqualified disapproval of Messrs. Slow and Swift’s conduct.”

“The most curious thing about them is this,” smiled the vicar: “Mr. Slow is, to all intents and purposes, the hare of the establishment, while without doubt his Swift partner is the tortoise! for I don’t think I ever met a slower man.”

“I have not been once through the churchyard since I came,” I said, presently, by way of getting off the subject of the solicitors, as I was every moment afraid lest Mr. Vaughan would ask me how I came to know anything about them; “do you think we might walk in that direction this morning?” and I glanced inquiringly from one lady to the other.

“I dare say Laura will go, won’t you, dear?” promptly replied Mrs. Dalton; and

she turned with the sweetest of smiles towards her niece ; " I shall be better in the house this morning, as I feel as if I had a little cold."

" You must let me stay and take care of you, then," was Laura's unselfish proposal.

" Oh no, dear, I could not think of such a thing," affectionately protested the lady ; " I shall amuse myself with writing letters until you come back, and very likely by the afternoon," she added, cheerfully, " I shall be able to go out for a drive."

This was not the first walk I had taken with Laura since my arrival at the vicarage, but hitherto we had gone in quite another direction to the old churchyard, so that I had not yet had an opportunity of noticing the change to which Mr. Vaughan had referred.

" I do hope," I said, somewhat anxiously to my companion, as we slowly approached the spot where I had so often stood side by side with the good, clever, unselfish, large-hearted village schoolmaster, " that the

simple tablet which Mr. Joyce erected to my poor mother's memory has not been removed, to make way for this newer and more pretentious monument?"

"Oh no," she quickly replied; "papa would never have consented to *that*; he knew how much you thought of it, and stipulated at the very first that whatever other alterations might be made, that at any rate should not be meddled with."

"I am delighted to hear it," I answered, with an air of considerable relief. "Ah! there it is!" as we suddenly came upon the old familiar scene; and I stood still and took off my hat, a tide of powerful emotions stirring the current of my thoughts—reminiscences sweet and sad returning like an electric flash across the region of my mental vision; my bodily eyes, meanwhile, being riveted, by a singular attraction, *not* on the comparatively recent erection, with its joyfully triumphant hope-giving *Resurgam*, but on the modest time-discoloured headstone which, in addition to these two uninterpreted initial letters of a name which it seemed my fate never to learn, bore

the sweetly suggestive, spirit-soothing words which good Mr. Joyce had selected as being the most suitable to express in her case the cessation of life's fitful fever : "*And there was a great calm.*"—Ah ! how my heart responded to the thought ; how glad and thankful I was to know that there *was*, in very deed, a great and mighty calm, not only for the body, but the soul—the calm of a "pardoned breast"—and that He who uttered that marvellous "Peace be still !" to the raging waves of Galilee, is even yet whispering it softly, and lovingly, and effectually, to many a trembling sin-burdened storm-tossed soul, teaching them all to realise, to their own unutterable joy and delight, that :

"He who leans on the Father's breast,
May sleep when storms are nigh !"

For a few minutes I remained wholly absorbed in these reflections, conscious that I was alone and unwatched, and had no occasion therefore to control my countenance ; for Laura Vaughan, with that remarkable intuition which enabled her to enter into other people's

feelings, had quietly slipped away, for the ostensible purpose of examining some flowers which had been lately planted on a distant grave, and before she returned I had recovered my usual manner, and could talk and look as calmly as before.

“I cannot think what made papa forget to tell you about this,” she said, in answer to some remark I made on the subject; “I always thought you knew, and was quite surprised when I heard him explain matters at breakfast.”

“It’s only another link in the chain of mystery which has always surrounded me,” I observed, as we sauntered on beneath the tree-lined avenue.

“Do you mind—*much*?” she asked, in gentle sympathetic tones.

“Not if my friends care for me as I am,” I answered, regarding her with an earnest wistful glance.

“Why, what difference can it possibly make to them?” was the serious, wondering retort; “you are always yourself, and what more do they want?”

"Ah! but people are not all like you," I said, shaking my head with a half smile.

"I should hope not, indeed," she lightly replied; "it would be a sad world for Aunt Jane, if they were. She thinks me quite an incorrigible, you know."

"That is only because she is so proud of you," I returned; "love makes her ambitious."

"I hate ambition!" was the impetuous response; "that kind at least," correcting herself, rather incoherently, "which renders yourself and everyone else miserable."

There was a slight flush upon her fair face as she spoke, and her voice was not quite so steady as usual, but the next moment she had recovered herself, and exclaimed, in a changed tone, as we stood looking down upon the wide expanse of blue sea which lay stretched out like a placid lake far below:

"I wonder if we should have time to go down?" and she pointed in the direction of the old precipitous flight of steps leading to the beach, which Mr. Joyce and myself had so often made use of in the long-ago past.

“ I don’t think it is exactly safe for you to venture down these crazy steps,” I demurred. “ I remember when I was quite a boy, people used to say it was dangerous.”

“ Oh, there is no fear,” she carelessly rejoined, “ and it shortens the distance so.”

I still hesitated ; but my companion had no intention whatever, it appeared, of being guided by my advice in the matter ; for before I could again speak, she had seized the rickety hand-rail, and begun the steep descent with an agility which showed that it was not the first time she had chosen this rough mode of gaining the sands.

“ Stop a minute,” I rather unceremoniously exclaimed ; “ if you *will* go, you must let me lead the way ;” and I held out my hand, and taking firm possession of one of hers, I proceeded with the utmost care and caution to guide her small feet down by the safest course.

CHAPTER X.

ENGAGED.

“Why did she love him? curious fool!—be still—
Is human love the growth of human will?”

“In peace, love tunes the shepherd’s reed ;
In war, he mounts the warrior’s steed ;
In halls, in gay attire is seen ;
In hamlets, dances on the green.
Love rules the court, the camp, the grove,
And men below, and saints above ;
For love is heaven, and heaven is love.”

ONCE I was really alarmed, as a large piece of the cliff crumbled and gave way even beneath Laura Vaughan’s light weight, and if I had not been at hand to help her, she must have fallen, and perhaps hurt herself very considerably.

As it was, I felt most thankful when we

had safely reached the sands ; and I stood still for a moment, and said gravely—

“ I want you to promise me that you will never come down this way again—unless,” I added quickly, seeing that she was about to demur, “ I am here to take care of you.”

“ I don’t like making promises,” was her evasive reply, as she turned away with rather a flushed face—something in my own anxious countenance having probably struck her as peculiar ; “ I am always afraid lest I should be tempted to break them.”

“ *I* am not afraid,” I significantly rejoined ; “ I never knew you break your word yet, and it’s not likely you are going to begin doing it now.”

“ But I have not promised *you* anything,” she demurely answered, a mocking smile coming over her lips.

“ No, but you are going to,” I quietly observed.

“ Am I really ?” she provokingly retorted, as she made a futile attempt to extricate her hand from the gentle grasp in which I still held it.

“Yes, you are far too kind to wish to give anyone unnecessary pain,” I said, in a low earnest tone.

“Pain?” she repeated, with one of those quick changes of expression which characterised her even as a child, “what do you mean?”—and her lovely violet eyes sought mine with a kind of earnest wistfulness.

“Can you not guess what my feelings would be,” I said, in a voice of semi-reproach, “if I were to go away from this *without* your promise?”

“No,” she answered very softly; then went on, with a little petulant gesture, “please don’t make a fuss about nothing.”

“Nothing!” I echoed, almost mechanically; “oh, Laura, you are positively unkind.”

“Unkind?” she exclaimed; and there was something like a quiver of pain in her voice.

“Yes, don’t you know how I love you, my darling?” I murmured, wholly unable to control myself any longer; “don’t you know,” here I drew her still nearer to me,

while I gazed fondly and admiringly down upon her, "that you are dearer to me than my own life, and that the thought of anything happening to you would fill me with the most exquisite misery?"

"Oh, Charlie!" this was all she said, but a wave of rich crimson stole suddenly over the fair sweet face, while her soft shy eyes were quickly veiled, and I could feel her small hand trembling within my own.

Almost without knowing what I did, I gently seated her upon a large flat rock which stood conveniently near us; and then, flinging myself down at her side, I told her the story of my deep devoted love.

"Oh Charlie! I *never* guessed!" she whispered, in an agitated voice, when I had finished; "until lately, I thought you so cold, and——" a little quivering sound, half sob, half sigh, filled up the sentence.

"I did not *dare* to let you see me as I was, my darling," I answered, in a tone of much emotion; "but *now*, if you will only let me love you, and tell me that you can love me

in return, I think I shall be the happiest man in the whole universe."

"*Let you!* why, there is no one in the world I care for like yourself," was the frank, and artlessly sincere avowal, uttered in the softest of tones.

"My own dearest!" I fervently exclaimed, as I put my arm around her with an almost reverential tenderness of manner, and kissed her sweet tremulous lips, feeling as if all my doubts and difficulties had suddenly vanished; as if my cup "already mantled to the brim with joy," as if, after long wanderings, and many obstacles, and much buffeting with temptation, I had been all at once landed on that wondrous, peaceful island, "where never wind blows loudly"—attained the highest summit of my worldly ambition, the one good *par excellence* for which I had hopelessly yearned, despairingly longed.

Ah, yes! God had been very good to me; and I was gratefully conscious of the fact, as I sat thus, with my darling beside me, dreamily listening to the soothing sound of the rippling wavelets as they gently broke

upon the firm smooth sand, enjoying a "deep and full tranquillity of bliss," an unutterable sense of infinite content.

" 'Never bloomed the earth so gaily,
Never shone the sun so brightly,' "

I said at last, turning, with a happy smile, to my companion :

" Ah, but we must be going home," she cried, starting hastily up ; " what *will* Aunt Jane say, if we are late for luncheon ? "

" There's no particular hurry," was my reassuring reply, as I drew her hand through my arm, " and you've not given me that promise yet, you know ! " I added, going back to the subject of the dangerous and unfrequented descent from the cliff.

" Is it necessary ? " she asked, with a little laugh. Then, seeing my earnest face, she went on, in a soft significant voice ; " do you think, after what you have told me, I shall *ever* want to come down that way again without you ? "

" God bless you, dear ! " I returned, in an agitated voice, greatly moved by the unmistakable marks of love and confidence

displayed both by look and manner, "it is a perfect marvel to me, how a bright sparkling creature like yourself could ever have learnt to care for so grave and unattractive a man as I am."

"Is it really?" she retorted, with a low rippling laugh.

"Sometimes I used to speculate about your probable future," I went on, presently, "and try to get accustomed to the idea of seeing you belong to someone else ; but, oh ! how hard I found it, when it really came to the point, to keep myself and my own feelings in the background."

"You always thought far too indifferently of yourself," said Laura, and there was an odd little break in her voice, as if she did not find it easy to say what she wanted ; "you might have *known* how utterly impossible it was that I should care for any one *but* you."

"You seemed so far above me," I murmured, huskily, "and I had so little to offer ! nothing in short, but myself ; no name, no fortune——"

“Don’t talk of that, *please*,” hastily interrupted my companion ; “I do hate the very name of money, and position, and all that sort of thing ; it’s what a man *is*, and not what he *has*, that *I* think of.”

“I know you are an unselfish darling,” I impetuously exclaimed.

“Unselfish ?” she repeated, as she turned her beautiful eloquent eyes towards me, with an expression of the deepest affection, “are you not giving me the only thing in the world that could make me perfectly happy ?”

“God grant you may never be anything *but* happy,” I murmured, fervently.

And then we walked silently along for a little space, and I tried to realise the great joy which had come into my heart.

Laura’s love was very precious to me. I did not deserve it, I knew ; but should I not value it all the more on that very account ? and would it not be the aim and purpose of my whole future life to merit the trust and confidence with which she had so generously treated me, and consider her comfort and happiness before my own ?

I had not the slightest doubt as to this latter point. I was so thoroughly conversant with her character ; so intensely interested in everything connected with her ; so proud of her, moreover, and able, I flattered myself, to appreciate her simple guilelessness and utter unworldliness far more than most men could have done. She had been to me for so many years the fairest and dearest of her sex, her very faults being more attractive, in my eyes, than the perfections of other people ; and I could not help noticing, of late, how greatly she had improved in many ways — how kind, and thoughtful, and considerate she was, where the comfort of others was concerned ; how beloved and appreciated she was alike by rich and poor ; how completely free from vanity or self-conceit, although her own personal charms were neither few nor commonplace ; while, in regard to intellect, she was vastly superior to most of her young lady friends and acquaintances, I suspect, though she never made a parade of her attainments, or put on an appearance of being wiser or more accomplished than her neighbours.

I must not weary my readers by repeating all the foolish speeches I uttered during our homeward walk ; for, as a rule, these things are not particularly interesting or edifying to any one, save those to whom they are specially addressed.

We, found, as Laura had anticipated, that we were late for luncheon ; but Mrs. Dalton was most gracious, and did not appear in the slightest degree vexed or impatient at the delay. She eyed us, on the contrary, with her blindest and most indulgent smile, as her niece began hurriedly to apologise for our tardy arrival, and I could not resist the temptation of saying meaningly, in answer to her evident curiosity to discover how matters stood with us—

“It’s all right, Mrs. Dalton ! won’t you congratulate me ?”

“*Well*, you certainly have lost no time !” she answered, regarding me with a half amused, half incredulous air, while Laura looked from one to the other in mute bewilderment, not quite understanding this new phase in her ambitious aunt’s character.

“Yes, I could not help myself,” I answered, with a smile of perfect contentment; “you *would* insist on sending us out together, you know,” I went on, with a little smile, “so you are partly responsible for the consequences.”

“That is not quite fair, I think,” was her condescending reply, as she walked, unhesitatingly, up to her niece—and kissed her.

“Oh, Aunt Jane!” stammered out my darling, turning a very flushed face towards her, “I fully expected a scolding.”

“You will be disappointed, then,” was the unexpected rejoinder; “I am very fond of Charlie, myself—I suppose I may call you Charlie, now?” glancing inquiringly at me.

“Please, do,” I answered, eagerly, and with a grateful appreciative expression.

Then, before we could say more, Mr. Vaughan had joined us, and without a moment’s hesitation, I went up to him, saying simply, but in an agitated voice:

“Ever since I have known you, you have

been to me a most kind and generous friend ; will you now add to your generosity by giving me your daughter ?”

“ So that’s it, is it ?” he exclaimed, as he wrung my offered hand, and then turned to look for the young lady.

“ Oh, papa !” she said, rushing forward in her gracefully impulsive way, and throwing herself into the paternal arms so lovingly outstretched to welcome her, “ Charlie has told me all about it, how good and kind you have been.”

“ In what way have I been good and kind, my pet ?” asked the vicar, glancing rather doubtfully at me, as if to discover how much I had told her.

“ In finding out his secret,” she responded, in low quivering tones, “ and giving him courage to come forward and tell me he loved me.”

“ And what does Aunt Jane say ?” remarked Mr. Vaughan, after a pause, and he turned towards her with rather an amused smile ; “ it can scarcely be expected, I suppose, with all due deference to Charlie’s feelings,

that she should be able to look upon him in *quite* the same light as her old favourite, Mr. Darringford."

"There is no need to bring in his name at all, I think," she answered, with dignified good-nature; "if Laura is satisfied, that is everything."

"And Laura's papa," softly murmured the young lady, as she laid a small hand carressingly upon his arm.

"My pet! of course I am satisfied," he replied, so heartily that there was no room to doubt his sincerity; "it is the very thing I should myself have chosen."

For this assurance he received another caress, which seemed to have the sudden effect of making his thoughts turn for a moment to himself, and his own lonely position when he should be called upon to part with his only and idolised child; for something like a sigh escaped him as he murmured quite involuntarily:

"I suppose, sooner or later, it must have come; but *what* a loss it will be to me."

"Don't talk like that, papa darling," said

Laura, startled and distressed beyond measure at the idea ; “it will be such a long, *long* time first——”

“Will it really ?” was his slightly incredulous rejoinder, as he made an effort to recover his usual manner.

“Yes, tell him so, Charlie,” looking imperiously over at me.

I smiled, and shook my head, as I answered, evasively :

“Perhaps we had better leave that an open question for the present, dear, and——”

“Yes, do,” opportunely chimed in Mrs. Dalton, without allowing me to finish my sentence, “and in the meanwhile, if I might be allowed to make a suggestion, I should like some luncheon.”

“Of course you would,” penitently exclaimed her niece, as she hastily threw down her hat and gloves, and took her seat at the table ; “I am so sorry——”

“No apologies are needed, my dear,” blandly interposed the elder lady ; “I have read somewhere that ‘love serves for food,’ so that I can quite understand your feeling at

this moment supremely indifferent to anything in the shape of material support."

"I hope your cold is better?" I observed, by way of giving Laura a little time to recover herself; for I could plainly see, by her flushed face, and the unusual nervousness of her manner, that she found it somewhat difficult to give her attention to the trifling details of a mere general and commonplace style of conversation.

"Yes, thank you," was the reply, uttered in a tone which showed that the supposed sufferer had herself forgotten all about it.

Then the meal proceeded in comparative silence, and at its close, Laura seized the opportunity of slipping quietly away, leaving me to entertain Mrs. Dalton as best I could.

I felt really grateful to her for the way she had received my news, and the kindness and consideration with which she seemed inclined to treat me; while as for Mr. Vaughan, he was absolutely struck dumb with amazement at her cool complacent manner, and the

blandly satisfied air with which she alluded to my changed position.

“Just for all the world,” this is what the vicar said, when he afterwards privately spoke to me on the subject, “as if she, and she alone, had been the originator of the idea, and no such person as Mr. Darrington had ever existed.”

“She has begun to weave a little romance out of my history,” I laughingly replied, without, however, thinking it necessary to enter into any explanation just then with regard to the question of money, “and fully expects, I believe, that eventually I shall turn out at least a nobleman in disguise.”

“Oh, if she has taken *that* crotchet into her head, it quite accounts for the apparent inconsistency of her conduct,” returned Mr. Vaughan, with rather a contemptuous shrug.

“As it happens, it is very convenient for me,” I replied.

“Yes, indeed, and for Laura, too,” assented the vicar; “I suspect by this time the poor child hates the very sound of Mr. Darrington’s name.”

"*I do*, at any rate," was my emphatic assurance.

"And yet you were actually going at one time to connive at his marrying her!" observed Mr. Vaughan, with dry emphasis. "However, we won't talk of that now," he hastily continued, recollecting, perhaps, that it was not altogether an agreeable subject for me; "'all's well that ends well,' and perhaps, when it really came to the point, you might not have been *quite* so placid over it."

"I assure you I *felt* anything but placid," was my earnest disclaimer.

"I dare say! stoics *do* suffer, I have no doubt, although their pride often makes them disguise the fact."

"*I am no stoic*," I answered, amazedly, "and as for my pride, though I certainly must plead guilty to having a very fair share of it, I don't think in this case it had much to say to the matter one way or another. Common gratitude alone must have sealed my lips."

"Really, I cannot see that you have so much to be grateful for," returned Mr.

Vaughan, in rather an impatient voice; "you seem to lose sight of the important fact that you owe everything to your own exertions."

"And you forget apparently," I quietly interposed, "that my own exertions would, under ordinary circumstances, have availed me nothing. Had you not come forward just when you did, and generously offered me a helping hand, I might, in a social and intellectual point of view, have found myself to-day in a far lower position than that which, thank God, I at present occupy."

"It is written in the best of books, 'all that a man hath will he give for his life,'" sentimentiously remarked the vicar; "I shall leave you to draw the inference."

"But indeed there's no inference to be drawn," I gravely informed him.

"Well, well; I don't suppose we shall *ever* agree on this particular subject," was the smiling retort.

"Probably not," I said, "if you will persist in giving me credit for what I don't deserve."

"According to your own showing, you deserve *nothing*," remonstrated Mr. Vaughan.

"Very little," I acquiesced ; "motive is everything, you see ; and really, when one begins to analyse the reasons which influence us in the performance of our very best and most meritorious actions, it's perfectly astonishing how the evil preponderates over the good."

"You are a stern critic, Charlie," replied my clerical friend ; "I'm not at all sure that you don't look upon things relating exclusively to yourself through the medium of a slightly morbid and hyper-sensitive imagination."

"I ought at any rate to apologise for my presumption in speaking so freely in your presence," I answered, with a half smile ; "but you have so often told me to forget your own ministerial position, that I am sometimes in danger of taking you at your word."

"I wish you would," he energetically responded ; "I do so hate people who seem to think they ought to ascertain the senti-

ments of others before expressing their own. It would be a poor world if our ideas all ran in the same groove ; and I hope I am not so narrow-minded as to suppose that my particular views must necessarily be more correctly orthodox than those of my neighbours. ‘Live and let live’ is my creed ; and though I certainly do feel that it is one’s duty to uphold the right, and manfully oppose anything like serious error, either in life or doctrine, I am yet, at the same time, most anxious to cultivate a tolerant and liberal spirit with regard to those who do not quite see eye to eye with myself in those non-essential minor points about which so much fuss is so constantly being made, and which serve so completely to disunite and embitter the minds of hundreds who might otherwise work pleasantly and unanimously together.”

“Yes ; it is a thousand pities that there should be so many discordant elements at work,” I answered, thoughtfully ; “if there is union nowhere else, there surely ought to be among professing Christians.”

“Your Utopian age has not arrived yet, you see,” was the significant rejoinder.

“Nor ever will, I fear,” I quickly observed, “judging from the jars and bickerings, and violent discussions which seem to be going on in almost every section of the Church.”

“If people would only learn to make allowance for other people’s peculiarities, and agree to differ on certain trifling and unimportant questions, a great step would be gained,” oracularly observed Mr. Vaughan. “Forms and ceremonies, and a high standard of duty, are all very well in their way, but to my mind Christian charity is better! and if we had a little more of *that* among us, we should get on far more happily and prosperously than we at present do: and instead of being always on the look-out to detect the mote in our brother’s eye, we should be ready rather to discover his virtues, and give him credit at least for good intentions and sincerity.”

“Yes,” I assented, glancing at him with rather a surprised expression, for I had never heard him give expression to his sentiments

so plainly before ; “ I have no doubt you are right ; there is far too little mutual forbearance manifested in the present day, and we often seem in danger of mistaking bigotry and intolerance for religion.”

“ Just so,” acquiesced the vicar ; “ we fancy our own side of the question must be right : stick closely to the particular tenets which we have been taught, perhaps, from our very childhood to hold, and instead of allowing a certain latitude to those who are differently constituted, or have been differently brought up, we set them down as being radically wrong, because they have the honesty to confess that they do not quite subscribe to our doctrines, or look upon things from precisely the same standpoint as ourselves.”

CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION.

“Are we not formed as notes of music are,
For one another, though dissimilar—
Such difference without discord as can make
Those sweetest sounds?”

“There shall never be one lost good !
What was shall live as before—
The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound ;
What was good, shall be good, with, for evil, so much
good more,
On the earth the broken arcs ; in the heaven a perfect
round !”

THREE months later we were married.

For, as Mr. Vaughan philosophically reasoned, when a disagreeable operation *has* to be performed, the sooner it is got over the better ; and in this case, he looked upon the

ordeal of losing his daughter in pretty much the same light, although he was far too unselfish to wish to stand in the way of what would, he felt, be for her ultimate happiness.

Just a few days previously to that fixed for the marriage, I arrived at the vicarage from London, where I had been busily occupied in providing a suitable home for my darling's reception—it having been arranged that part of the year at least we should reside there—and when I entered the breakfast-room the following morning, I found my future father-in-law deep in the perusal of a certain letter which seemed, judging from the marks of excitement visible in his countenance, to be productive of considerable astonishment.

“Read this, Charlie, and tell me what it means!” he abruptly exclaimed, putting it suddenly into my hand, as soon as he had himself mastered its contents.

I ran my eye hastily over it, and then mechanically re-folded it, and returned it to him, saying quietly :

“It’s all right, I think. I told Messrs. Slow and Swift to communicate with your own solicitors, so that this money might be included in the settlements ; and it appears they have done so.”

“But how on earth did you ever get so large a sum as thirty thousand pounds ?” demanded the amazed vicar, while even Laura turned her eyes upon me with an expression of surprise, and Mrs. Dalton smiled and nodded, as if to call my attention to the fact that she had kept my secret ; “and why did you never tell me anything about it ?”

“Well, the real truth is,” I said, answering the latter question, “you have acted towards me with such unparalleled generosity, and shown yourself so totally devoid of anything in the shape of a mercenary or worldly wise spirit, that I knew it would make no difference either in your feelings or Laura’s,” looking tenderly over at her, “if I told you of this little change in my prospects. I preferred, therefore, keeping it from you as long as possible, so that you might have the

full benefit of the blessing which comes to those who give all, and receive nothing in return !”

“ What nonsense you are talking, Charlie !” remonstrated Laura, and she shook her head reprovingly at me.

“ You see, he has rather an odd way of looking upon things,” graciously interposed Mrs. Dalton. “ Now, *I* should have thought the right and proper thing would be to lose not a moment in communicating the good news to his friends, instead of taking every precaution to prevent them from knowing it. I told him as much, indeed, when he first spoke to me on the subject.”

“ I presume, then, that *you* were in his confidence,” drily remarked Mr. Vaughan, “ whatever might have been the case with regard to other people.”

“ Yes,” I hastened to explain ; “ I frankly told her what my circumstances were, as I thought that the fact of my being not quite penniless would probably incline her to look upon me with less disfavour than she might otherwise have done.”

“No doubt,” meaningly retorted the vicar, a grim smile coming to his lips.

“Well, I don’t deny,” admitted the lady, in her blindest and most matter-of-fact tones, “that the thought of this money *did* have a certain effect upon me; but, at the same time, I must say that it was more the peculiar way in which he obtained possession of it than anything else which enlisted my sympathies, and made me regard him with a far greater amount of interest than I had ever felt for him before.”

“Really, you quite excite my curiosity,” observed Mr. Vaughan, in a tone between jest and earnest. “What say you, Laura dear?” turning laughingly towards his daughter; “don’t you think it time for *us* to be let into this wonderful secret?”

“I am quite content,” she answered, regarding me with a glance of the most perfect confidence.

“Mrs. Dalton possesses a very vivid imagination,” I said, addressing myself to the task of enlightening them (to the utmost of my power) with regard to this anonymous

bequest, "and this leads her to attach far more importance to the affair than it really deserves."

"I don't know about that," she dissented, with a mysterious shake of her head; "it may have more serious consequences than you at present imagine; and if you will only be guided by me, and insist on getting it properly ventilated, there is no saying what the result may be, so far as your ultimate prospects are concerned."

"I must leave Mr. Vaughan to decide that question, I think," was my evasive rejoinder; and then, without further delay, I proceeded to put him in possession of all the particulars with which I was myself acquainted, respecting a matter which, in whatever aspect I regarded it, seemed involved in obscurity.

"Mr. Whitworth might be able to throw some light upon the subject," observed the vicar, after we had considered it in all its bearings.

"He never will!" I unhesitatingly replied; "I have written several letters to him lately,

but his answers are invariably the same—always kind, and even affectionate in their tone, but containing no scrap of information on the one point about which he knows I am the most anxious.”

“Can’t you go and see him?” suggested Mrs. Dalton: “a personal interview is often more satisfactory than mere letters.”

“Did you not hear that he had left Middlebury?” I asked, in surprise.

“No; where is he gone?”

“To the South of France,” explained her brother-in-law; “he was ill for several months, and directly he recovered, the doctors ordered him away for an indefinite time, so that it is quite uncertain whether he will ever return to this particular neighbourhood.”

“If he really *does* know anything, he ought to be forced to divulge it,” severely remarked Mrs. Dalton.

“Dear Aunt Jane, what does it signify?” laughed her unresponsive niece; “I cannot see what possible object there is to be gained

by making a fuss about so unimportant a subject."

"Unimportant !" echoed Mrs. Dalton, almost with a groan, while Mr. Vaughan turned his head aside to conceal a smile.

"I am quite satisfied with Charlie as he is," persisted Laura, laying the lightest of touches upon my arm as she spoke, "and I should not like him half so well if he were to be transformed into somebody else."

"But, my dear child, you don't know what distinguished position he might be called upon to occupy."

"I don't want him to occupy a distinguished position," was the impulsive rejoinder ; "he would not be a bit happier than he is now, neither should I ;" and, without waiting for any reply on the part of her shocked and scandalised aunt, she flitted out upon the lawn through the open window, and began to gather some of her favourite roses.

"So far as I am concerned, you never spoke a truer word, my darling," I said, as I

joined her ; “ I *could* not be happier than I am. I always feel,” glancing from the roses to herself, “ as if this was a sort of earthly paradise.”

“ Do you really !” and I could see by the archly mischievous sparkle of her eye that she was going to say something playfully severe ; “ there *was* a time though when you seemed in a great hurry to get away from it, and not all the united persuasions of papa and myself could induce you to prolong your stay, even for a single day.”

“ Ah, you have not forgotten that yet,” I said, looking into her fair, ingenuous face with an expression of eager interest.

“ Forgotten ! how could I ?” she replied in pretended indignation : “ it was quite a new experience to me, you know, as I had never been accustomed to have my wishes so lightly set aside.”

“ Do you know *why* I was obliged to tear myself away from you ?” I asked.

“ Tear yourself away !” she mockingly repeated ; “ what a delightfully flattering way of putting it !”

"Do you know, though?" I went on, insistently.

"Tell me," was the half whispered response.

"Don't you remember how attentive Edmund Stafford was to you?" I asked, significantly.

"Well, why should he *not* be attentive to me?" she demanded, with a demure shake of the golden head.

"Ah, but I was afraid lest my darling's heart might be touched; and as I knew that there were circumstances which would prevent his ever marrying, I thought it wiser to separate you before you had had time to become really attached to him."

"What idiots men are, to be sure!" scornfully parenthesised my fair companion, in a sort of stage aside; "*some men*, at least!" she amended with a glance, which seemed to say that she had no intention whatever to allow *me* the benefit of this limited qualification. "Really, Charlie, the idea is *too* humiliating."

"In what way is it humiliating?" I asked, "I do not exactly see——"

“No, of course you don’t,” she hastily broke in, without allowing me to finish my sentence, “because you are so stupid! I told you so at the time, and it was quite true; for if you had not been *blind* you would have seen that I cared no more for Mr. Stafford than you do for old Mrs. Grimshaw.”

“But, my darling!” I stammeringly explained, “how could I be sure of that? You always seemed so bright and happy in his society.”

“Because it is my nature to be bright and happy,” she laughingly replied; and “besides”—here a warm glow came into the delicate cheeks, while a curious light appeared in her eyes—“I wanted to stir you up, and make you jealous.”

“Laura, my own dearest girl, do you know what you are saying?” I laid my hand caressingly upon the golden head as I asked the question, a strange thrill of exquisite pleasure quivering meanwhile throughout my whole being.

“Of course I do!” she answered tremulously; “and oh! I *was* so angry when I

found you were going away. You thought I was vexed at your banishing Mr. Stafford, but it was quite a mistake. I did not care a straw what became of him ; it was only you I cared about, you dear, stupid old fellow !” Here the flushed face was precipitately hidden within my arm, and with a softly murmured expression of passionate devotion, I stooped and pressed my lips upon the soft rippling hair, feeling for the moment almost overpowered with love and gratitude at the thought of this deep and long continued affection for myself, mingled with a kind of angry amaze as I reflected upon the foolish blundering way I had acted on the occasion to which she had just referred, and the vexation and annoyance I had been the unintentional cause of inflicting upon her tenderly sensitive spirit.

However, it was over now, and by mutual consent we soon left the past behind us, and began to talk of the present and future.

Life’s mingled yarn seemed very fair and clear to us just then—unshadowed and untangled, the good being uppermost, while the

evil was safely hidden away, far out of sight.

We had no reason to ask each other the question :

“ May I trust that these warm feelings
 Never will grow cold and strange ;
 And that *you'll* remain unaltered
 In this weary world of change ?
 When the shades of care or sorrow
 Dim mine eyes and cloud my brow,
 And my spirit sinks within me,
 Will you love me *then as now* ? ”

Ah, no ! *our* faith was much too firm for that ! *We* could look forward to the future without a single doubt or misgiving, knowing that although changes *must* come with the lapse of years, clouds *must* sometimes darken our horizon, and troubles and afflictions perhaps be sent occasionally to remind us that

“ There is another and a better world,”

we should yet rejoice in the consciousness of that wonderful reciprocity of heart and spirit, which would help us to comfort, and help, and sustain each other, in traversing life's chequered pathway ; love “ much, and

well," whatever might befall us ; be a tower of strength, a light in darkness, and a joy in sorrow !

I will not attempt to enter into a lengthened description of our marriage.

It was not, to use Mrs. Dalton's expression, "a very brilliant affair," though everything, she condescended to add, went off in a fairly creditable manner ; while as for the wedding breakfast, and other minutiae connected with the important ceremony, which had been left entirely in her own hands, *that* she complacently declared to be "simply perfect ;" and I am bound of course to believe that she only spoke the truth.

The old parish church was crowded on the occasion, for the vicar's daughter was universally beloved and respected in the neighbourhood, and so far at least as the simple country people were concerned, they would not, I think, have considered her properly married if they had not been present to assist at the important ceremony.

We went to Switzerland for our honey-

moon, and as Mrs. Dalton had consented to remain at the vicarage until our return, Laura had not the same feeling about leaving her father as she might have had if he had been left entirely to his own resources.

Finally it was arranged, to the satisfaction of all parties, that his sister-in-law should for the future reside entirely with him, the only stipulation being that he should spend a portion of every year with his daughter and myself in London, and that we in our turn would make a point of visiting him at Saltsea during the summer months.

And now it is time that I should draw this fragmentary history to a close.

I could enlarge—I could tell of children growing up around us, fresh ties to cement our love and friendship, of my own success in the particular profession I had chosen by way of making use of the talents with which God had entrusted me, and various other things connected with myself and those dear ones whose interests were so closely bound up in my own—but I forbear.

For many a long year—though they seemed short to us—have my darling and I been permitted to dwell peacefully and harmoniously together, and now we are going hand-in-hand adown the hill of life, looking calmly forward to the hour—which cannot be far distant—when we shall be called upon to enter another and higher existence, when having passed “in solemn loneliness” through death’s darkly flowing river, we shall meet again in that fair country where :

“ Every pulse is thrilling,
With rapture earth’s sojourners may not know,
Where Heaven’s repose the weary heart is stilling
And peacefully life’s time-tossed currents flow.”

* * * * *

In case any of my readers care to know what became of Harold Fortescue, I may briefly mention that his father’s ambitious views with regard to him were abundantly fulfilled, for he turned out one of the cleverest and most distinguished men it was ever my privilege to meet with.

Soon after my own return from India, he married, and took up his permanent residence

at Fortescue Hall, and about a year later he was returned by an immense majority as Member for the County; an unexpected and entirely unsolicited honour, which made him from henceforth devote the greater part of his time and attention to the performance of his new duties, in bringing forward such measures as seemed likely, in his estimation, to conduce to the public good, and throwing himself heart and soul into any scheme which had for its end and aim the mental and moral well-being and advancement of those whose interests he was the most anxious to promote.

* * * * *

And what of Edmund Stafford? Ah me! how true it is, that as a man soweth so he must reap!

We *may*, thank God! repent; we *may* obtain forgiveness full and free, even after spending our time and our talents in the service of self, and sin, and Satan; *may* enter into the Kingdom with washed robes, and new hearts, and purified spirits; we *may* be saved; but it is—*so as by fire!*

The sin is pardoned, but some at least of the melancholy effects must remain ; for a ruined constitution can never be built up again, or lost health entirely restored. We *must*, therefore, to a certain extent, suffer from the consequences of our folly, and reap the bitter fruits of our own doings :

“The harvest of our yesterdays.”

For two years only was Sir Edmund spared to testify, by his steady consistent walk and conversation, to the depth and reality of that great and mighty change which had taken place in him.

Two short years, during which he exerted himself to the very utmost to show, by deeds rather than words, how thorough and sincere was his repentance—how anxious he was to make up, as it were, for lost time ; how ready, and more than ready, to spend and be spent in his Master's service.

First “ what he was,” *then* “ what he had,” he gave ; and no sacrifice was considered too great, no exertion too laborious or self-denying, could he only thereby be the means of

promoting the cause of religion, or assist in any measure towards bringing others to an experimental knowledge and appreciation of those all-important truths which had become so unutterably precious to himself.

I was with him for nearly a week before he passed away, and never, while mind and memory last, shall I forget the solemn lesson which I then learnt, or the strangely blended feelings of pain and gratitude with which I contemplated my dying friend: *pain*, as I thought of his career being thus prematurely cut short; *gratitude*—intense and unfeigned—because of the mercy which had been vouchsafed to him; the patience which had borne with him so long; the love which had brought him at length to see the error of his ways, and turn with true faith and repentance to that Being whose laws he had so often and so grievously trampled under foot.

* * * * *

“Sometimes my sins stare me in the face even yet, Charlie,” these were his last coherent words; “but I look away from them

all to Christ : ‘ mine is the guilt, but His the righteousness ;’ *I* am all weakness and helplessness, but He is mighty to save. He is everything I want—my joy, my peace, my comfort, *everything*—EVERYTHING !”

And then the feeble voice grew feebler ; the light of recognition died out of his eyes ; the ebbing strength continued to decline, until his enfranchised soul had taken its flight, and the inanimate clay was left tenantless and forsaken.

And as I went slowly and sorrowfully away I suddenly recalled to mind our Blessed Saviour’s words :

“ I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

THE END.

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